FLORA ANNIE STEEL: BRITISH MEMSAHIB OR NEW WOMAN?

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Rudyard Kipling might have tried to prove that females are a misfit in the [Indian] colony and eventually become an impediment to masculine commitment to empire (Sen 14). However, his female counterpart Flora Annie Steel, an Anglo-Indian living in India for twenty-two years, demonstrated that the memsahib didn’t have to be a woman that hindered the British Empire but supported and elevated British status in India. Flora Annie Steel’s life and works delve into the complicated lives of Anglo-Indian women living and surviving in Colonial India. Through a close examination of Steel’s novels *On the Face of the Waters*, and *Miss Stuart’s Legacy*, her autobiography *The Garden of Fidelity* and her household management manual, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, I will argue that Steel attempts to reconcile both her the ideals of the New Woman with the ideals of the pro imperialism memsahib. It is through her complicated depiction of the Anglo-Indian woman that Steel is able to reveal duality of being both a British Memsahib and New Woman.
To my Guardian Angel
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FLORA ANNIE STEEL: BRITISH MEMSAHIB OR NEW WOMAN?

Rudyard Kipling might have tried to prove that females are a misfit in the [Indian] colony and eventually become an impediment to masculine commitment to empire (Sen 14). However, his female counterpart Flora Annie Steel, an Anglo-Indian living in India for twenty-two years, demonstrated that the memsahib didn’t have to be a woman that hindered the British Empire but could support and elevate British status in India. Flora Annie Steel’s life and works delve into the complicated lives of Anglo-Indian women living and surviving in Colonial India. Scholarship about Anglo-Indian women living in India has focused on their missionary work. While previous research on Steel has focused on her as a journalist, there is very little scholarship which studies the intersection between her nonfiction work, about living in India, and her novels. Through a close examination of Steel’s novels On the Face of the Waters, and Miss Stuart’s Legacy, her autobiography The Garden of Fidelity and her household management manual, The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook, I will argue that Steel attempts to reconcile both her ideals of the New Woman with the ideals of the pro-imperialism memsahib. It is through her complicated depiction of the Anglo-Indian woman that Steel is able to reveal complex nature of being both a conservative British Memsahib and progressive New Woman. I have chosen to study the novels Miss Stuart’s Legacy and On the Face of the Waters, because as one of her first novels published and one of the most
famous in Steel’s collection, these novels display how Steel’s novels became a bridge between traditional Victorian novels and New Woman fiction.

In order to better understand the context that Steel was writing in I will spend some time outlining those terms. New Woman fiction was a literary movement in the late nineteenth century that corresponded with the woman’s suffrage movement. The subject matter of this fiction was often controversial and challenging to the social structure at the time. In contrast, the novels that were written in the early Victorian period would be considered to be “feminine.” The subjects were mostly romantic, sensational, and domestic. They focused marriage and the strict gender roles of the Victorian period.

Towards the end of the century, novels began to take on the social issue of the woman question. Novels in the later 1890’s considered the “social and economic system which deprived women of any chance for intellectual development,” meaning authors examined the issues of female education, gender roles and images of female sexuality (Nelson 2). The novels written by Anglo-Indian women also transformed the Victorian novel. A new genre of novels began to emerge: the colonial adventure novel. Essentially these novels carry the tropes of the traditional romance novel with a hint of New Woman issues and little bit of adventure thrown in for excitement (Richardson 78). Of the novels examined here, *On the Face of the Waters* falls under the category of colonial adventure novel, while *Miss Stuart’s Legacy* is a little more traditional. The roles that both female protagonists play can be classified somewhere between the traditional Victorian woman and the New Woman. Steel’s writing can be viewed as a bridge between the traditional Victorian novel and the extremely radicalized New Woman fiction novel.
Another complicated figure was the British memsahib. The term “memsahib” was used to reference European women living in India during British rule. The memsahibs that came to British India could wield enormous powers (especially political) via her husband’s position in the Indian Civil Service (Roye 198). While this image of power is interesting it is a bit narrow; a British woman in India wasn’t always viewed that way. Susmita Roye remarks, “Despite having greater authority and opportunities, the supposedly unconcerned memsahib is most widely seen as indolent, uncaring, selfish, and luxury-loving”(198). This idea as depicted in literature of the time is countered with Flora Annie Steel’s autobiography The Garden of Fidelity and household management manual The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook. In The Garden of Fidelity we learn that in the twenty-two years that Steel lived in India, she was no aloof memsahib. In fact, her actions display how her role as a memsahib strengthened her role as New Woman activist as well as staunch supporter of the British Empire.

Steel showcases her social activism with her interest in doctoring Indian women and working at improving schools. She started by simply reading stories to boys and then having them practice their limited English. As she became more involved, she interacted more with the lives of her students. For example, as a thirteen-year-old student of hers struggles with writing homework he reveals that his child is dying. Steel attempted to save the child but was unable to do so. She observes “But give an instant’s thought to the poor lad who was trying to mix up English grammar with fatherhood?” (Garden 63). This statement shows how closely involved Steel was in the lives of students she was working with. She spent time building a relationship with the people, to become a confidant of sorts with the students. It also is a statement on her feelings about child marriage. Steel is
incredulous about the idea of a thirteen old trying to be a father and attempting to complete his education. She juxtaposes the image of a thirteen year old as a student and the image of the same thirteen-year attempting to be a father at the same time. In this instance Steel showcases her involvement and opinions about the social issues that she encountered in colonial India. The more involved she becomes the more she aligns herself with the ideology of the New Woman movement. The more Steel used her skills in the non-domestic sphere the more her social activities become her professional life. By taking on a professional life Steel can be classified as a New Woman in her own right.

The issue of education comes up continually throughout Steel’s autobiography. Regarding her time working with the male students, Steel remarks “But my experience with these boys showed me the extreme difficulty of educating India on Western lines while the environment remained Eastern” (Garden 62-63). She believes the struggle to implement a western education system is hindered by eastern philosophy. Only when the influence of the west is accepted, only then will the students thrive. This statement reveals how Steel regarded the Indian culture in terms of her beliefs about the British Empire. Her time working with the male students led to the beginning of a female school. Working at the female school fortified Steel’s belief in the necessity of having the Imperial presence in India. She remarks, “It [the school being built] was an excellent example of State-made progress such as exists doubtless over half India at the present day; since the inborn aversion to female education is as strong as ever” (Garden 62-63). This opinion clearly aligns Steel’s beliefs with that of the British rule. In comparison to the Indian aversion to female education, British rule would provide women with more of
an opportunity to receive an education. Thus, creating a connection between the imperialistic agenda and the feminist agenda.

This belief is furthered by the ideas expressed in her household management manual, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, which she wrote with Grace Gardiner. On addressing her approach to maintaining a European household with Indian servants Steel writes,

Easy, however as the actual housekeeping is in India, the personal attention of the mistress is quite as much needed here as at home. The Indian servant, it is true, learns more readily, and is guiltless of the snifftiness with which Mary Jane receives suggestions, but a few days of absence or neglect on the part of the mistresses, results in the servants falling into their old habits with the inherited conservatism of dirt. This is, of course, disheartening, but it has to be faced as a necessary condition of life, until a few generations of training shall have started the Indian servant on a new inheritance of habit. It must never be forgotten that at present those mistresses who aim at anything beyond keeping a good table are in the minority, and that pioneering is always arduous work (Steel and Gardiner 12).

This passage clearly identifies Steel’s perspective when it comes to managing the colonized Indians she was employing. This passage could be viewed simply as helpful guidelines on how to deal with servants, but the disdainful manner in which they discuss the Indian servant highlights the cultural differences between Indian etiquette and British etiquette. Steel and Gardiner don’t indicate what Indian ideas of cleanliness are; they do indicate that these Indian ideas are an unfortunate generational attitude. The “right” attitude will have to be slowly bred into them. The authors also encourage the memsahibs
to be diligent about their roles in the household. Like their husbands, the women are pioneers and this comes with certain responsibilities toward the native Indian peoples they encounter. In order to maintain their power, they have to correct the native Indian citizen’s methods in order to teach the correct British civility to the people. Only their British, civilizing influence can slowly breed the correct way of conducting themselves into the people.

In this passage, the authors consider their Indian servants as if they were children who have to be led in the right direction. Steel and Gardiner reinforce their representation of the Indian as a child throughout the chapter “The Duties of the Mistress.” On indicating the importance of disciplining the servants to carry out orders, the authors write, “Certainly there is at present very little appeal in the average Indian servant, but then it is implanted by training, there is very little sense of duty in a child...The Indian servant is a child in everything save age, and should be treated as a child; that is to say; kindly, but with great firmness” (Steel and Gardiner 12). In discussing the “little appeal” of dealing with Indian servants, Steel and Gardiner indicate hesitancy at having to deal with their household staff. Yet it is necessary to treat each of the servants as if they were children in need of guidance. Without their guidance, their servants would not know how to conduct themselves. This can be seen as a metaphor for the relationship between India and Britain. Without the British, India would not know how to handle itself. Both Steel and Gardiner support the idea of having to mentor their household staff into proper methods of management just like their male counterparts working to manage the Indian subcontinent. The way in which the memsahib ran her household was not unlike her husband’s role in governing of the Indian subcontinent.
While their husbands managed the outside Indian colonial political sphere, the memsahibs managed the domestic sphere. Like in their gender roles in Britain, they upheld their roles which now included shaping the Indian colonies.

It is clear from Steel’s non-fiction that while she was no aloof memsahib, she was in many ways a New Woman. Steel was actively involved in the Indian community around her, taking interest in the schools, healthcare and other social issues. Her social activism and consciousness allowed her to engage in activities that took her outside of the domestic sphere. These activities allowed her to engage with the world on different level as depicted in her fiction. While such authors as Sarah Grand discussed venereal disease and woman’s sexuality, Steel deals with New Woman issues in a more traditional manner. My investigating of the novels *On the Face of the Waters* and *Miss Stuart’s Legacy* reveal certain patterns. Both novels contain the traditional domestic plot, a married English woman dealing with issues pertaining to her husband. Both Belle Stuart of *Miss Stuart’s Legacy* and Kate Erlton of *On the Face of the Waters*, adhere to some of the traditional motifs of the early Victorian novel. Both of these novels can be considered Anglo Indian romances. Anindyo Roy states that, “Set against the backdrop of the Indian empire, these romances employed familiar love plots that revolved around the relations between imperial Englishmen, Englishwomen, and native Indian or Eurasion women” (91). Steel’s works expand on this idea by using the Indian landscape not just as a background but also as a catalyst for transformation in the characters. Through the course of each novel, Belle and Kate interact with the Indian culture and people, which alter their perspective on life. Examining the trajectory of Belle and Kate reveals some of the stereotypes of the Anglo-Indian woman in India. Both characters begin their journey
unaware of their Indian surroundings. They are more of the aloof memsahib discussed previously. As the novels progress, however, the marriage plot falls apart, the Indian culture and landscape become more prominent, and the two female characters have to adapt their behavior. As the novels progress Steel slowly shifts her heroines towards becoming more rational and self-reliant women. This shift causes the novels to move toward the New Women genre.

Published in 1893, Miss Stuart's Legacy was written while Steel was still living in India. In comparison with the On The Face of the Waters, this novel follows the more traditional Anglo-Indian romance. It contains a father-daughter relationship, a marriage plot, and a little bit of colonial intrigue. The novel deals with the story of sweet and innocent Belle Stuart. Belle comes to India to live with her father, stepmother and half-siblings. Steel spends some time at the beginning of the novel showcasing how Belle is a little unaware of her Indian surroundings and culture. Steel sets this up by playing Belle against the idea of India.

Born in India, and therefore a daughter of the soil, she could not have been further removed in taste and feeling from the toiling self-centred cosmogony of the Indian village in which she stood, had she dropped into it from another planet. So, alien in heart, she passed through the tide of life which sets every morning towards a great cantonment, looking on it as on some strange, new picture. Beyond all this, among people who ate with forks and spoons and went to church on Sundays, lay the life of which she had dreamed for years. The rest was a picturesque background; that was all (Miss Stuart Chap. I Kindle Locations 124-128).
Here we see how Belle, though born in India, is completely unaware of the world around her. The fact that Steel describes the way in which Belle views her environment as a “picturesque background” signifies that Belle views the world through a slightly dreamy, and limited perspective. To Belle, India itself is simply a background to what is going in her life; it is “strange.” In other words it is not like her and therefore she doesn’t connect to it. Steel also goes as far as to describe Belle as “removed in taste and feeling” or distanced from the actuality of the environment and culture she is a part of.

It isn’t until a combination of a bad experience at a party where she accidently insults Major Philip Marsden, the man who will eventually become her love interest, and seeing a group of Indian women walking with their children, that Belle desires to become more aware of her surroundings. “Of all this again Belle knew nothing; but suddenly, causelessly, it struck her for the first time that she ought to know something. Who were these people? What were they doing? Where were they going?” (Chap. IV Kindle Locations 546-547). Once she begins to ask these questions, Belle begins to become more involved with the world around her. This is the first step that Belle takes to becoming a more aware of her surroundings.

One of the major themes of both Miss Stuart’s Legacy and On the Face of the Waters is that men have a paternalistic need to protect women. This is not an unusual trope for a Victorian novel. For Belle the men in her life are the ones who both protect her and cheat her. When Major Philip Marsden realizes that Belle’s father has committed suicide because he couldn’t pay the note, he hides this information from her and pays the debt himself. He justifies this because he had promised Dick, Belle’s cousin and suitor that he would help her and because he himself has begun to fall in love with her. These
same reasons are why Major Marsden also leaves Belle thirty thousand pounds on the event of his death. He does not realize that his “overmastering desire to save Belle” would lead to her getting married to her father’s gold digging colleague John Raby (Chap VI Kindle Locations 1190-1191). Unfortunately he is presumed dead when out with the troops on a mission.

With her marriage to John Raby, Belle transfers her need to idealize the male in her life to her husband. What she doesn’t know is that Raby knew that his wife would inherit the thirty thousand pounds as her legacy. To Belle her husband was the ideal husband:

In fact Belle, as she looked affectionately at her lounging spouse, felt no shadow of doubt as to the wisdom of her choice; so little has the mind or heart to do with the crude facts of marriage, so absolutely distinct are the latter from the spiritual or sentimental love with which ethical culture has overlaid the simplicity of nature to the general confusion of all concerned. (Chap XIV Kindle Locations 2003-2006).

Here, Steel’s narration of Belle’s feelings point to a specific fact that truly separated the early Victorian novels from the New Woman novels. The emphasis Steel places on the use of sentimentality when choosing a future husband is characteristic of the stereotypical angel in the house. While the angel in house stereotype focused on the woman’s role in the domestic sphere, it is also connected to the idea of the woman being the emotional center of the family. This is contrary to the New Woman requirement that she “examined the world from an intelligent and informed base” (Cunnigham 10). Steel emphasizes Belle’s lack of rational thought before getting married to John Raby. This push and pull
between the sentimental and rational thought process can be seen as a struggle between the traditional Victorian wife and the progressive new woman. The lack of rational thought comes to fruition when she discovers a draft of Major Marsden’s will. This shock leads to Belle losing her pregnancy, and her convalescence signals the end of Belle’s simple perspective of the world.

Through the course of the novel, Steel slowly but surely strips away Belle’s innocence. From the girl who was blind to her father’s true nature to the betrayal of the husband she thought perfect, Belle no longer views the world the same way. As she becomes more aware of the world around her, Belle attempts to become more useful to the people in her family, first offering to work for her father by writing correspondence and helping in any way she can. His reply to her question is to wonder about the state of her health: “Her father looked at her in vague alarm. "You are not feeling ill, are you, Belle? Not feverish, I hope, my dear!” (Chap IV Kindle Locations 591-592). Likewise, when she attempts to become more involved in her husband’s business and with the natives of India his response is a mixture of condescending remarks about her intellect and how the native people would view her. For instance, Mr. Raby, her husband, remarks, “Now a woman with a clear head like yours, Belle, you are much cleverer than I thought you were “ (Chap XIV Kindle Location 2023). Both her father’s attitude and her husband’s attitude indicate that they would prefer if Belle stayed within the gender roles defined by society. Their traditional ideas of what Belle’s role should be hinder Belle from moving beyond the domestic sphere. Though Belle’s wanting to useful comes from a sense of duty and love towards both her father and husband, she is still kept away from the non-domestic sphere.
Throughout her marriage Belle does begin to work with the native people surrounding her home. She becomes their medical consultant, and works to help the people around her. As Belle attempts to become more involved in the community, she becomes aware that her husband’s practices are all rational and without consideration for the native citizens. Up till that point John Raby had used the legacy to invest in the farming business. He had not garnered goodwill like his wife. It is not until further in the novel when Belle stands up to her husband for Major Marsden, who had simply been missing and not dead, that she truly becomes her own woman. When John attempts to draw Major Marsden into a long brewing scuffle with the native farmers she

stood firm, every fiber of her nature tense in this final conflict, a conflict not so much between the two men, as between her instincts and her beliefs. And yet, the sense of personal injury so long repressed made her words reckless. "You have taken everything from him--everything that makes life worth living--even his love. And because of that he has given up everything without a word; and now you ask his honor, his life, in a bad cause; but you shall not have it! Philip! if you love me,--if you love your own good name,--stay where you are. It is I who command it!"  (Chap XXV Kindle Locations 3725-3729).

Here Belle finally admits that her married life is not satisfactory and clearly chooses a Major Marsden. By coming to terms with the reality of what her married life is really like and choosing Major Marsden, Belle makes a choice. The struggle between “her instincts and her beliefs” allows her to openly disagree with her husband. She goes against the traditional idea of a wife following her husband no matter what and chooses what she believes is right. This final proclamation doesn’t stop either man from entering
into the scuffle with the native farmers. It does lead to the death of the John Raby. While it would have been traditional for Steel to end the novel with the marriage of Major Marsden and Belle, she doesn’t. Instead she has Belle return to England. But the Belle from the beginning of the novel is gone; the twist is that Belle ends up having a son by John Raby. This child is developmentally challenged, and this leads to Belle becoming an activist of sorts. Having inherited another large sum of money from the late Dick, her former suitor, she devotes her time to building a children’s hospital. Though Phillip Marsden and she still have a relationship, it is now managed in a more rational manner. Through her motherhood and the advantage of money, Belle is able to move away from being dependent on another man for security. Instead the novel leaves us with a woman who has been made more self aware through her experiences. She has become secure, through the inheritance but also through the very activism that she had wanted to take part in in colonial India.

In *On the Face of the Waters*, Kate Erlton begins in a very similar fashion. She is unhappily married to a Major in the British Army, uninvolved in the Indian community, and committed to saving the perception that her marriage is happy. Kate clings to the expectations of the traditional Victorian woman. The novel begins with Kate reflecting on her life in India:

And as she drove, her mind diverted listlessly to the semicircle of dark faces she had left unanswered. What had they wanted? Nothing worth hearing, no doubt! Nothing was worth much in this weary land of exile where the heart-hunger for one little face and voice gnawed at your vitality day and night. For Kate Erlton set down all her discontent to the fact that she was separated from her boy. Yet she
had sent him home of her own free will to keep him from growing up in the least like his father. And she had stayed with that father simply to keep him within the pale of respectability for the boy's sake. That was what she told herself. She allowed nothing for her own disappointment; nothing for the keen craving for sentiment which lay behind her refinement. All she asked from fate was that the future might be no worse than the past; so that she could keep up the fiction to the end, (On the Face Chap I Kindle Locations 267-273)

This passage isolates two aspects Kate’s life, her opinion about living in India and her attitude toward her marriage. Kate associates her misery with the experience of living in India; by referring to India as a place of “exile,” she sets it apart as an environment where she is an outsider and has no place. Her life in India separates her from her son and from her life in England. The feeling of being exiled stems from the fact that she is so disconnected with her family life. As a traditional Victorian woman she is supposed to be fulfilled by her family, yet it is her unhappy family life that creates a sense of exile. She is physically separated from her son and spiritually separated from her husband. She sent her son to live away from his father, in an attempt to save his upbringing and stayed to try and protect her husband from destroying the outward appearance of their traditional marriage. The fact that her marriage is not fulfilling is confirmed when Kate refers to it as a work of fiction. She hopes that she can keep up the act, playing the happy and devoted wife. Kate’s character in this passage is clearly aligned with the traditional tropes of the proper, self-sacrificing Victorian wife. She is devoted to the upbringing of her son; she attempts to do her duty to her husband at the cost of her own satisfaction. She will only admit to misery from missing her son but not from staying with her husband.
This image of Kate slowly transforms throughout the course of the novel. Kate’s marriage is complicated by her husband’s gambling and his affair with Alice Gissing. Though Kate attempts to save her marriage, she is unable to when her husband falls in love and impregnates Alice Gissing. In Alice Gissing, Steel creates a character that is polar opposite to Kate. Alice is free of all social bonds and freely admits to marrying for money, and that she would marry for position if her current husband dies. She also greatly enjoys her life in India, and has no thought of England.

In the big dark dining room also--where Alice Gissing, looking half her years in starch, white muslin, and blue ribbons, sat at the head of the table--there was no cult of England. Everything was frankly, stanchly of the nabob and pagoda-tree style; for the Gissings preferred India, where they were received into society, to England, where they would have been out of it (On the Face Chap VI Kindle Locations 847-850)

Here, we see how Alice Gissing approaches India. She has no love of England as evidenced by the statement, “there was no cult of England” suggesting that English society in England was only for a group of certain status. The Gissings, being members of the business class, would not be accepted in the same social circles in England, as they would be connected to in India. By referring to British society as a cult, Alice paints a picture that implies how strict the social rules in Britain are. India allows the Gissings more freedom in the British social circles. Unlike Kate, Alice enjoys her life in India. She doesn’t worry about the perception that people have of her marriage. There is no fiction to play at for Alice Gissing. She lives a freer life, she is not as tied to the strict
social rules that Kate ties herself to. This freedom is allowed to run free, by the looser social rules of British society in India.

The catalyst that causes Kate to evolve from a traditional wife and mother is the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857. When her husband decides to leave her for the pregnant Alice Gissing, Kate Erlton confronts Alice. As the rebellion breaks Jim Douglas helps her get to the Meerut army cantonment, until that becomes dangerous for the English and she is forced to take her chance and escape once more to the Gissings. She is aware of the situation that she is in and that she is the only person she can depend on for her escape.

“Those [British] in the storehouse at Duryagunj still clung to the belief that succor must come somehow; but Kate Erlton, behind the wood-pile, knew that her hope lay only in herself.” (Chap V Kindle Locations 3972-3973). This is the first instance in which she displays a sense of action and agency towards her own safety. It is also here that she takes on the appearance of an Indian woman in order to protect herself. “A blanket; a horse's double blanket, dark as the darkness itself. Here was a chance, indeed. She caught it up and paused deliberately in the darkest corner of the square, to slip off shoes and stockings, petticoats and bodice; so, in the scantiest of costumes, winding the long blanket round her, as a skirt and veil in ayah's fashion” (Book IV Chap I Kindle Locations 4059-4062). She is smart enough to take advantage of her resources and disguise herself as an Indian ayah or nanny. Kate taking on the disguise of an Indian person is significant because this is the first time that she takes action to protect herself and become more self-reliant. This marks the first time that she takes on the physical appearance of an Indian, and doing so she begins the discovery of her inner self. Once
she escapes to the Gissing household, she is lucky to meet Jim Douglas and escape to Delhi.

It is in Delhi that Kate Erlton truly comes into her own. It is vital to her protection that the Delhi citizens consider her to be an Indian woman. Therefore, Jim Douglas, with the help with his servant, the widowed Tara, finds a small rooftop apartment for them to share. Over the course of their time in the tiny apartment, Kate is able to preserve the spirit of the English culture through her ability to arrange their little apartment: “That was not much, but Jim Douglas' eye noted the indescribable difference which the position of a reed stool, the presence of a poor bunch of flowers, the little row of books in a niche, made in the familiar surroundings” (Chap II Book IV Kindle Locations 4446-4448). For Jim Douglas this situation and his interaction with Kate pull him back to a more English way of life. Douglas’s skill in the army was his ability to disguise himself and become a part of the Indian society and gather information. The two characters in this way slowly move toward each other culturally as well as romantically.

Though she is able to keep a sense of English culture, Kate becomes more confident as time passes by in the apartment. For Kate, this time in the apartment signifies her slowly moving towards more understanding of the Indian culture. For instance the one item that is available for Kate to keep herself busy with are language books. Therefore she slowly begins to learn the native language. And though she states that she only learned it because “In truth she had nothing else to do,” it is still an important part of her transformation (Chap II Book IV Kindle Location 4450). Over this time not only does Kate Erlton educate herself in language, she also learns to care a great deal for Jim Douglas. In learning the language, Kate strengthens the connection between
herself and Jim. Jim Douglas is a character that moves easily between the Indian culture and British culture. In learning the language and educating herself about the Indian culture, she becomes equal to Jim. Jim shares his observations on how Kate has changed over the course of their time in hiding:

“Learned!” he echoed sharply. "You've learned everything, my dear lady, necessary to salvation. That's the worst of it! Your chatter to Tara--I hear when you think I am asleep. You draw your veil over your face when the water-carrier comes to fill the pots as if you had been born on a housetop.” (Chap IV Book IV Kindle Locations 5004-5006)

Here we see how Kate’s has become accustomed to embracing her Indian disguise as a way to survive. She has taken on the language and the mannerisms, which give her a way to protect herself. This allows for her to take on the challenges of living in hiding. The knowledge she has gained of colonial India allows her to protect herself from the danger of being found. The more Kate learns about India, the more she learns about her own abilities. While at the beginning of the novel she thinks of India as land of exile, it is while living in exile as an Indian that Kate discovers her own abilities.

When Jim and Tara both have to leave, Kate is left to stay concealed. Unfortunately, it is at this time that native men attempt to discover who is atop of the roof. Because of her fast thinking, Kate is able to scramble and escape the rooftop. This time she doesn’t wait for somebody else to save her; she takes the initiative to figure out a way to get herself out of a dangerous situation. She eventually finds her way back. But Jim Douglas is forced to move out of the city without the chance to come back and get
Kate. In these circumstances, Kate decides to protect Jim from coming back for her and makes a decision:

She had not realized at first that he had escaped, that he was safe; that he was, as it were, quit of her. But he was, and he must remain so. A new decision, almost a content, came to her with the suggestion. She was busy in a moment over details. To begin with, no news must be sent. Then, in case he were to return, she must leave the roof. (Chapt II Book V Kindle Locations 5990-5993).

Here she decides to brave going out into the city of Delhi with Tara, and hiding herself away. That way if Jim assumed that she was dead, he wouldn’t come back into harms way. This decision to protect Jim Douglas returns Kate back to her roots of being a self-sacrificing woman. Though she is living outside of her marriage, she proves that she is still essentially English. If anything she is becoming more confident, it just happens that she is gaining her confidence by becoming more and more interested in her life in India. Even though it is her experiences in India, which allow Kate to become more confident, she holds on to the British ideals she was raised with.

Desperate to protect Jim and force him to believe that she is dead, she accepts Tara’s plan of acting like an Indian widow. When Tara decides against this plan at the last moment, Kate is installed in an ashram as a Hindu woman doing penance in order to bear a son. It is this religious, Indian experience that gives Kate understanding of her inner self. Over her time at the ashram she slowly learns how to meditate and learns how to have a better sense of self. This transformation is seen in the way she approaches the world around her towards the end of her time at the ashram.
She was learning a strange new fellowship with the dream of which she was a part, because it would soon be past; because the trees, the flowers, the birds, the beasts, were mortal as herself. A squirrel, its tail a-fluff, was coming down the trunk of the next tree in fitful half-defiant jerks, its bright eyes watching her. The corner of her veil was full of the leavings of her simple morning meal, which she always took with her to scatter under the trees; and now, in sudden impulse, she sank down to her knees and held a morsel of plantain out tenderly. (Chap III Book V Kindle Locations 6229-6232).

Here we see how she has transformed from the beginning of the novel. Before her experience during the Rebellion, India was a “weary land” that sucked the vitality out of her. But at the ashram she is now able to feel a “strange new fellowship” with the past. Before, she was focused on keeping up appearances of her proper and unhappy marriage. From the time at the ashram, Kate is focused on accepting the cycle of life. She is more accepting of the natural ebb and flow of life. Before this experience she was caught up in the ephemeral conditions of life, such as the troubled nature of her marriage and the duties of the proper wife that she clinging to for dear life.

It is through these events that Kate Erlton’s attitude toward life is changed. However, Steel ends the novel in a traditional way. Eventually Kate gets out of Delhi and back to the Merrut cantonment where she is briefly reunited with her husband. Steel quickly dispenses of Major Erlton in the battle to take back Delhi, which leaves Kate free to be joined together with Jim Douglas who has returned to Delhi to search for her. The novel ends with the end of the rebellion and with Kate Erlton and Jim Douglas married and settled in England. This quick finish keeps the novel within the motifs of the
traditional Victorian novel; it makes Kate Erlton take ten steps back from the one step forward that she had taken. By the end of the novel Steel has pulled back both the structure of the novel as well as her heroine to the traditional ideas of the Victorian marriage plot. By keeping the novel within the traditional tropes of the marriage plot novel, Steel still adheres to the traditional ideas of marriage. This allows Steel to keep her audience from objecting to the book’s content. Unlike the other New Women novels where authors openly discussed sexuality and venereal disease, Steel keeps the themes of *On the Face of the Waters* to marriage, spies and colonial intrigue. Instead of radicalizing her fiction, Steel keeps her audience engaged in the heroine’s journey to independence throughout the novel. In this case Steel used the marriage plot to her advantage and used it as a tool to pull her audience while discussing the complications of marriage, adultery and women’s education.

In both *Miss Stuart’s Legacy* and *On the Face of the Waters*, the heroines transform from women who are complicit in the patriarchal society of the British empire to women who are complicit in the patriarchal society but have taken on more attributes of a New Woman. In *Miss Stuart’s Legacy* Belle’s time in India allows her to cultivate her activism skills. Though it takes her time to move beyond her husband’s bad reputation, she attempts to learn more about colonial India, and attempts to administer whatever medical attention she can. This activism in India, along with the income Belle inherits allows her to create a more independent and fulfilling life for herself in England. Not only does she create a career for herself, she does not marry but continues to have a relationship with Philip Marsden. This unconventional romantic relationship, moves the character of Belle from the traditional Victorian ideal to a more complicated New
Woman ideal. Though it never crosses into married relationship, Belle and Philip have created a relationship that is built on trust and friendship. In the case of Kate Erlton, we have a woman who was an aloof memsahib who was not attached to colonial life, who transforms into a more independent and confident woman through her struggle for survival in India. Though the long-term effects of this change aren’t noted in the book, it is still an important journey. Steel’s readers have no indication of Kate taking any of her experiences with her to England. But the experiences she has are an important one for Steel’s readers. The journey that Kate goes on does create a discussion on the importance of women being self-sufficient.

While India gave the memsahibs a chance at a more active life, it also meant becoming complicit in the patriarchy of the British Empire. In order for the memsahibs to gain power they must exert power or influence over the Indians they interact with. By belonging to the British Empire they have more status and influence in the colonies. This can be seen in the way that Steel represents her Indian characters. Depictions of colonial India such as the interactions between the Indian characters and the British in *Miss Stuart’s Legacy* and the depiction of Tara the widow in *On the Face of the Waters*, all reveal Steel’s belief that some separation must exist between the two groups to maintain British power.

In *Miss Stuart’s Legacy*, Belle’s interactions with the Indian citizens are complicated by her husband’s business ventures. In their relationship Belle represents the social activist role, while her husband has no use for the natives other than to grow his business. It is clear that Belle is interested in knowing and helping the farmers who live
on their land as well as locally. But this is complicated by the people’s reaction to her
husband.

The tragic, poverty-stricken, yet contented lives of the poor around her had a
strange fascination for the girl, and the desire to see and understand all that went
to make up the pitiful sum-total of their pleasures, led her often, on her solitary
morning rides (for John was an incurable sluggard) through the alleys and bazaars
of the great city. In the latter, the people knowing in a dim way that she was the
judge sahib's wife, would salaam artificially, but in the back streets both women
and children smiled on her, much to her unreasoning content, (Miss Stuart Chap
 XV Kindle Locations 2226-2230)

This passage portrays both Belle’s attitude toward the people around her as well their
attitude towards her. Though she recognizes that the people live “poverty-stricken, yet
contented lives,” she looks upon this from a distance. She is unable to bridge the cultural
gap between herself and the people. She wants to study how their lives can be both
lacking in financial stability and carry joy. Her fascination is what limits her ability to
connect with the village people. She looks at the people as a separate beings whom she
must study like they are a novelty. Likewise her position as the “judge sahib’s wife” also
has a formal tone, which results in the insincere manner which people approach her. Her
association with the British government doesn’t create an communal feeling between the
two groups.

As Belle becomes more and more independent, she becomes more involved in
the community around her and improves her reputation.
Most Englishwomen in India gain some knowledge of doctoring, not only from necessity, but from the neighbourliness which turns them into nurses where in England they would be content with kind inquiries; and, though croup is comparatively rare among the native children, Belle had seen it treated among English ones. Such knowledge, a medicine-chest, and common sense seem, and indeed often act, like magic to the ignorant eyes helplessly watching their loved ones fight for life; (Chap XXIII Kindle Locations 3457-3462)

Here we see how the “knowledge of doctoring” that Belle has gained allowed her to become a valuable member of the Indian community. Though she is exerting herself and becoming involved, she still holds herself above the people she helps. In describing the people as “ignorant” and how their eyes watched “helplessly,” she creates a distance between her and the Indian community she seeks to serve. The very knowledge that gives her agency also creates a hierarchy with her on top and the Indian community below her. Both of these instances show how even though Belle is interested and is a benevolent and kind influence, she still upholds the separation between the two cultures.

In On the Face of the Waters the interactions between Tara the rescued widow and Jim Douglas establish the idea of the western influence over eastern societal problems. Once Jim Douglas saves her from the ritual of sati, where the widow immolates herself on her husband’s pyre, he creates a specific relationship with Tara. Throughout the text, Steel uses this relationship as an analogy for the British Empire and India. The complicated nature of this relationship is displayed in the following passage.

But she had been eight years in James Greyman's [Jim Douglas’s alias] service; more than eight bound to him by the strangest of ties. He had been the means of
saving her from her husband's funeral pyre; in other words of preventing her from being a saint, of making her outcaste utterly. Since none, not even other widows, would eat or drink with a woman rejected by the very gods on the threshold of Paradise. (On the Face Chap III Book I Kindle Locations 504-507)

Here we see Tara’s perspective at being saved from the practice of sati. Her conflicted feelings about being saved are apparent when she refers to be saved as “preventing her from being saint.” Though Jim Douglas may have believed that saving her was the right thing to do, to Tara this act creates a separation between her and the other woman of her community. By creating a connection the British, Tara is bound to Jim Douglas, but severed from her own community. Likewise, for the British living in India it may have seemed that India needed saving, but this does not mean that Indians wanted to be saved.

Another instance that creates a separation between the two cultures is when Kate attempts to take on the facade of an Indian widow in order to protect Jim Douglas. Tara thinks:

Would the mem really be suttee? she had asked herself again and again. Would she do so much for the master? Would she--would she really shave her head? A grim smile of incredulity came to Tara's face, then a quick, sharp frown of pain. If she did, she must care very much for the Huzoor. Besides, she had no right to do it! The mems were never suttee. They married again many times. And then this mem was married to someone else. No! she would never shave her head for a strange man  (Chap II Book III Kindle Locations 6030-6034)

Here we see how the customs of widowhood that Tara embraces are ones that she cannot see the “mem” take on. She recognizes the different cultural approaches that widows of
different countries adopt. Though it is perfectly acceptable for her to take on the custom of sati (suttee), wearing white and shaving her head, she feels it is wrong for a mem. From Tara’s perspective there is a separation between the two cultures. No matter what, to Tara, Kate will never be able to completely become a part of the Indian culture. Not only is there a separation between the two races from the British perspective, there is also a separation from the Indian perspective. This scene also plays into Tara’s jealousy of Kate’s relationship with Jim. It is a relationship that she cannot have, because she is a widow and because she is of Indian heritage. Sepoys were allowed to take Indian mistresses in the early years of colonialism, which is the period this novel is set. But at the time Steel was writing this, was beginning to be transformed with more and more English woman coming to live in India (Tuson 293). So for Tara the obstacle of Kate Erlton transforms the relationship that she cherishes with Jim Douglas. It is through these interactions with Tara that we see how the two communities are separated by colonialism and cultural differences. This is a separation that is reinforced by both the British and Indian characters.

In these two novels Steel creates complicated and intricate characters that show how complicated life in the Indian colonies was. Both heroines transform from aloof women living in India as though they never even left England. They both slowly gain more independence, as they discover more of Colonial India. The difference in the two novels comes from that Miss Stuart’s Legacy is aligned more with a traditional Victorian novel than On the Face of the Waters. While the novel is set in India, it doesn’t take as much advantage of the Indian backdrop as On the Face of the Waters. I contend that this difference is a sign of how Steel slowly evolved from writing traditional Victorian novels
to writing more progressive colonial adventure novels. Steel’s novels never turn into the radicalized New Women novels. Steel’s writing serves as a bridge between the traditional domestic novel and the progressive adventure novel. With *On the Face of the Waters*, Steel used adventure and intrigue to create a novel that felt traditional but showcased a heroine who had moved toward the progressive new woman ideal. The shift that Steel makes between the traditional and progressive is subtle. What does tie together the heroines from both her novels is that they both moved toward a better understanding of themselves. And from that understanding they are able to create lives that satisfy and fulfill them.

It is from their time in India that both heroines are able to gain a better sense of self. In Belle’s case, the time in India is one of transformation from a naïve and innocent girl to a fully realized woman. This primarily comes from her time doctoring and interacting with the native Indian citizens. Though Belle’s interaction with India is far less than Kate Erlton’s in *On the Face of the Waters*, it is still a valuable experience that gives her the gumption to start a children’s hospital in England. Without that time spent practicing and using her skills as a nurse and caregiver, Belle wouldn’t have the confidence to meet her goals. In Kate Erlton’s situation, she has a much more immersive experience of India. The longer and more immersed in her Indian disguise she becomes the more and more confident and independent she becomes. She learns how to survive and how to rely on her own faculties to survive and stay out of danger. It is also through her meditative experience at an Indian ashram that she is able to come to terms with her proper yet broken marriage.
These journeys mirror Steel’s own journey in Colonial India. I have argued that in Steel’s non-fiction works discussed in this paper indicate that she herself was an activist and involved in the local community. Like her heroines she explored the environment around her, and this is one of the things that gives her agency in her own life. She didn’t simply sit and continue living in India as if nothing changed. Instead the life she that she describes explores the complexities of attempting to be a modern British woman living in India. As Gráinne Goodwin asserts, “Like works by Eliza Lynn Linton and Mary Ward, Steel’s journalism promoted fairly conventional and patriarchal attitudes regarding women’s status, yet simultaneously, she was capable of expressing radical views more readily associated with the New Woman writers such as Sarah Grand” (506). So even though Steel was a modern woman in many modes, she was traditional in many ways.

The combination of both traditional and New Woman characteristics can be seen in both Steel and the characters of Kate and Belle. While both fictional women challenge the traditional domestic plot by having love interests outside of their marriage, they do return to respectable roles in society. Kate ends up married to Jim Douglas. Though Belle ends up making a very rational decision about her relationship with Philip Marsden and doesn’t marry, she is redeemed by her motherhood and her role at the children’s hospital. Though she is independent and not dependent on a man, her role as mother keeps her within reach of the domestic roles assigned to woman. Like her characters, Steel’s connection to the domestic world is what facilitated her non-domestic interests in the world. Her role as a mother is what allows Steel to connect to the Indian village women. Another character that is redeemed by her caring, mothering nature is Alice Gissing from On the Face of the Waters. In the midst of a confrontation with Kate Erlton before just as
the Rebellion is about to begin, they are attacked at the Gissing house, Alice Gissing dies saving a friend’s child. This event connects the more sexually free Alice Gissing back to a more respectable and heroic characterization. Her caring, mothering nature is what saves her from dying as a fallen woman. The woman who lived freely and had an affair and became pregnant by another man is redeemed by her maternal instinct. Belle and Kate are able to live out their lives but the character of Alice Gissing has to die a tragic death.

In reconciling both the progressive and traditional ideas in her writing, Steel kills off the character that may have taken too much agency for herself. Though British Indian culture offered a looser view of British social rules, there were still some lines that shouldn’t be crossed. Alice Gissing’s character served as a warning for what might happen if there wasn’t enough of a separation between the two cultures.

Steel can be given credit for widening the role of the Anglo Indian women. The works I discussed in this paper reveal a complicated view of the Anglo-Indian female. In my discussion of Steel I have found that she is both a progressive New Woman and a conservative Memsahib. Through her representation of herself in her works as well as her characters, Steel created a more complex view of the Anglo-Indian woman. In fulfilling their role as social activist and interested party in the Indian colonies, Steel and her heroines act as agents of British imperialism. Steel’s views are apparent in her household management manual’s advice the importance of training out the bad habits of the Indian servants so that they know how to behave in a civilized manner. Steel shares this view through her characters. This attitude is seen in the condescending manner with which Belle is interested in the lives of the native Indian citizens. For Kate Erlton and Jim
Douglas, though they both interact with Indian culture intimately, they still return back to their English roots. By the end of the novel, the rebellion has ended and so has their Indian adventure. Both Belle and Kate gain knowledge of India, and it is this knowledge that helps Belle have the drive to build a children’s hospital and Kate survive through the Sepoy Rebellion. With both characters returning to England, I contend that this was Steel’s way of communicating her loyalty to the British Empire. Though both women have become more progressive in their own lives, they still return to the strict society of England. They return to England before they travel down the same path as Alice Gissing. With this separation of the slightly traditional, slightly progressive Belle and Kate from the radical Alice Gissing, Steel implies that progress can be positive but too much progress might cause trouble.

Steel had knowledge of India and its culture that she gives to her characters as well. This is the knowledge that gives Belle and Kate agency in their lives. Their time in India made it easier to move between the domestic sphere and the non-domestic sphere. It is that very same knowledge of India that provides her and her characters with the ability to free themselves from the strict social roles. It is this very same knowledge that allows them the ability to impose themselves on Indian people. The dynamic between the memsahib and Indian people can be compared to a bully in a schoolyard. In order for the bullies to feel powerful, it is necessary to beat up the other kids. This is the case with Belle and Kate. In order for them to gain agency in their own lives they must impose themselves on the Indian people. In freeing themselves from the strict social mores of Britain, the Anglo-Indian woman had to subjugate the people of India.


ENDNOTES

1 See Roye, “Lady Missionary in the Memsahib’s Depiction”
2 See Goodwin, “I Was Chosen Out as Oracular”