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Contrasting Femininity and Complex Female Relationships in Colonial India: Memsahibs, Ayahs, and Motherhood

Ananya Verma

The idea of femininity, or how a woman's perception is formed, is very fixed in our societies. From our early years, women are shaped into molds that are created by the divided gender roles in the community. The primary role of a woman is considered to be the process of nurturing and embracing motherhood while her other achievements become secondary. In this process of glorifying the idea of motherhood, it is often forgotten that women have multiple identities which shape them into different individuals. Some women might be repelled by the idea of motherhood while others would openly embrace it, shaping a different understanding of motherhood among different women. As in this paper, I look closely at the memsahibs and the ayahs of colonial India, I look beyond their identities as colonizers and the colonized. This is an attempt to understand how the ideals of femininity, especially motherhood varied for these women as they exercised their identities. In this process, I also seek to understand the relationship that was shaped between these two as they shared domestic space.

The ayahs held a very significant position in the British household. There are two forms of perception that one receives from the sources about them. The British children who were raised fondly by the native ayahs narrate fond memories and shared a deep connection with these motherly figures. While on the other hand, the 'adults' of that time had a turbulent relationship with the ayahs. There was an air of suspicion around their existence, as it corrupted the future generation of the British empire. This was stemming from the deep connection that the children shared with these women, often picking up not only their mannerism but also their language. It was very essential for the memsahibs to appoint ayahs, in this strange country. Back home they could rely on their mothers and other female relatives for help in raising a child but far away from home, the native women were their only option. There was always a preference to hire an English nanny, but this was a financially draining option and responsibility. There were some cases where a British governess would overlook the works of the ayahs. It has to be understood that servants

were a necessity in all British Indian households but the economic sources at the disposal of families were different.

Several colonial connotations are found in 'The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook', a handbook for the memsahibs living in India to maintain their households. One of the chapters in the book quite descriptively tells the duties of an ayah and emphasizes that a good ayah, however, is difficult to get. The book has given us a very detailed idea of the varied role of an ayah in a colonial household while also subtly explaining the reservations of the British regarding the service of the natives. The author informs us that the duties of the ayah varied from being a maid to the memsahib and in case of the presence of a child, it is said 'when she is head nurse, she is of all the servants the most important. The idea of the ayah as a constant companion of the memsahibs creates a very direct relationship between the two women without the involvement of a child. It is also instructed to the memsahibs that, being the only women servant in the house, the ayah should be treated with consideration and respect. The ayah in many cases could have been the only confidant of the memsahibs in the household. A glimpse of this bond is seen in the accounts from the life of Mrs. Sherwood, where she receives a beetle- nut wrapped in leaves and immediately thinks of it as a gift for the ayah looking after her son, Henry. Another instance of empathy is seen after the passing of her son, Mrs. Sherwood meets the ayah who had looked after him in a poor condition, and she mentions a feeling of remorse.

Despite the empathy and understanding, the relationship between the memsahibs and ayahs was multi-dimensional. They still were the colonizer and the colonized. The visible threat of the Indian ayahs for the British is laid out in 'The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook' where it is mentioned that 'natives are lazy, careless and independent.' (Steel and Gardiner, 1898) and ' the Indian ayahs are singularly kind, injudicious, patient and careful in their care of children; but to expect anything like common sense from them is lay yourself open to certain disappointment.' (Steel and Gardiner, 1898) There were also religious connotations attached to the ayahs that should be hired by a good memsahib. It is mentioned that the appointment of mahomedean ayahs was because of caste prejudices which the author is suggesting to give up for the well-being of their children. The British parents were also concerned about the children picking up religious habits from their ayahs. Mrs. Sherwood in her account mentions being extremely aggravated about her

ayah when she brought the child back with idolatrous doab (Bindi) on his forehead. It was considered the duty of these mothers to raise the future of the empire with the Christian values of English society even in this faraway land.

The equation between the memsahibs and the ayahs is also shaped by the attachment to the children. The ayah becomes the primary motherly figure in their life while the memsahibs were often portrayed as the distant figure. In joint families, the children often receive ‘motherly’ love from more than one female figure but the difference that appears here is the power hierarchy in the colonial household. Many sources are available of these children growing up and fondly remembering their Indian ayahs but what these ayahs felt about these children is difficult to understand because of paucity of sources and accounts written by them. They nurtured these children like their own while being aware that they were also their masters. This lullaby, mentioned in the book, life of Mrs. Sherwood gives insight into the duality of these engagements.

*Sleep make baby,
Sleep make;
Sleep, little baby ,
Sleep, oh! oh!
Golden is thy bed; Of silk are thy curtains.
From Cabul the Mogul woman comes
To make my master sleep.
(Sherwood, 1864)*

Mrs. Sherwood also mentioned the ayah as a ‘faithful attendant’ as she holds her baby boy close to her until he was breathing his last breaths. These women saw the children through sickness and in health and any harm to them cause an ache to them as well but this was also their bread and butter. Where does one draw a boundary between work and care?

Contrasting to this is the image of the memsahibs who were only partly involved in the lives of their children. They had multiple responsibilities which often required them to engage in social interactions outside the house. The ayah was mostly responsible for looking after the day-to-day requirements of the child like cleaning and feeding. The ayahs quite frequently showed their love physically to these children, like wrapping the children in a cloth and rocking them near the fire.

It was also a common sight that during the time which the mother-child spent, the ayah was not absent from the scene.

These differences in their expression of motherhood come from the way they were taught themselves. The memsahibs and ayahs represent the two societies where the role of a mother differs, creating multiple femininities. As mothers, the memsahibs found it their responsibility to discipline their child, ensure good education and manners are inflicted on the children. This does not mean they did not have affection towards their children, this was their affection. While in India, the author of 'The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook' signifies that the Indian children were unruly and ill-mannered in the way they were raised. Being a mother comes in various shades, uncountable shades.



**Family portrait of an English colonial official with his Indian servants - Northeast India c.1880
(Credit- imgur.com)**



**George Clive and his Family with an Indian Maid by Joshua Reynolds
(Credit- artpaintingartist.org)**

The portraits of British families in India also provides an interesting insight into the domestic world of colonial India. Both portraits are among the many that feature the family along with their servants, especially the ayah. It is interesting to note that the child is being held by both the memsahib who is the mother as well as the ayah who is also a motherly figure in their life. This creates an idea of sharing motherhood between the two women and yet the presence of a hierarchy in their positioning. In both portraits the ayah is positioned downwards, either bending or sitting down while the memsahibs are positioned upwards. This is a perfect example of intersectionality which creates different feminine ideas.

Another obvious question that arises is whether the memsahibs were concerned about the attachment of their children with the ayahs more than what they shared with them. As mothers, women are told their children are their world, and the image is created that for a child, a mother is irreplaceable. But motherhood is not that simple and these expectations become a burden for many women. It could be a possibility that many of the memsahibs would have felt insecure about their relationship with their children but they also understood the need of having ayahs. This situation can only be understood when one puts themselves in the place of the Memsahibs.

In the present as well, women are hired to look after young children. It would be wrong to term them as ayahs because their position differs in the sense of power dynamics. As women have increasingly joined the workforce, their decided responsibilities in the domestic sphere have altered to a certain extent. Domestic workers are hired to look after the children and often are seen accompanying the families in public places as well. This modern-day relationship between the mother and the domestic worker provides an insight into the relationship of the ayahs and memsahibs, but does it only partially. There are several instances where working women have expressed distress and shame in leaving their children at home while seeking professional growth. This is because of the continuation of the idea of limiting women to domestic spheres and imposing 'traditional motherhood' on them. Yet the women are aware of the importance of these care workers in their lives and find a sense of comfort in leaving them with another motherly figure. Although, not widely, men have also evolved into the role of caretaker for children by being more involved in the process. This also shows the evolution of fatherhood in the modern world.

This paper sought to understand the complexities and the individualities of motherhood through the memsahibs and ayahs. They were two varied groups of women belonging to opposite environments. Their multiple identities shaped their understanding of motherhood as it does for modern women as well. Women learn from the women that came before them but are constantly fitting themselves into the expectations of society. In this objective of understanding motherhood, it only becomes clear how subjective it is signifying that no two women are the same and no two mothers are the same. It is hard to draw any conclusions here because understanding femininity is a continuous process as it changes every day.

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