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Hidden Lives and White Women's Burdens: Victorian Images of the Indian Zenana

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ABSTRACT

The article considers how the Zenana, the portion of the house in which Indian women live, has been represented in a selection of texts that include British nineteenth century novels, missionaries' reports and feminist writings. The zenana is portrayed in exotic, orientalist and islamophobic terms, that voice the authors' cultural bias. In the eyes of the Victorians, the zenana is a fascinating space which gives them the opportunity to compare and discuss the social position of native women and memsahibs. As a consequence, the representation of the zenana works as a symbolic identity battleground and a cultural benchmark that measures the distance between oriental backwardness and western civilization.

In particular, the Indian women's segregation offers British women the prospect to design their own colonial task, complementary to the male one. The memsahibs claim a specific role as Indian women's 'saviors', defining their own white women's burden. As missionaries who are allowed to penetrate the rooms forbidden to white males, British women become the champions who conquer the most secluded Indian territory. As feminists, they yearn to defeat Indian male barbarous oppression, disregarding their own subjugation in Britain. In both cases, women missionaries and feminists are not totally aware of their entanglement with imperialist male tenets, the same beliefs that keep them on the margins of British society. For these reasons, we may conclude that the analysis of the manifold representations of the zenana disclose many Victorian epistemic complexities and colonial ambiguities.

Keywords: Victorian novel; zenana; missionaries; feminism; islamophobia.

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1. Hidden lives: Indian women and the Zenana

India plays a substantial role in fueling Victorian colonialist discourses and constructions of racial and national identity. Booker rightly speaks of "literarization of India" (Booker 1997:105) to explain why the presence of the sub-continent in fictional and non-fictional works contributes so

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significantly to nourish the epistemic complexities of so called 'Age of Empire'. The widespread interest for Indian customs brings the British public to consider the description of the women condition in the Hindu and Muslim world as a very fascinating topic, quintessentially exotic and very engaging. In the Northern regions and in the areas of the former Mughal empire, Indian women, especially if belonging to the upper classes, live their hidden lives in the separate space of the zenana, offering themselves as a challenging example of cultural and religious 'difference'. In the eyes of most Victorians, the oppression of Indian women –for this is the oversimplified, general interpretation of the zenana life- reveals all the backwardness of the Asian culture. The condition of Indian women becomes a benchmark of the distance between Indians and 'feringees', which makes evident the superiority of the colonizer. But the interest for the life in the zenana is also a specific incentive for British women to discuss their social role and to claim a more active involvement in the Empire. In fact, the apparent impenetrability of the Indian female space, forbidden to English males and even to male missionaries, contributes to make it a place of resistance, that defies male colonization, but is open to women's involvement. (Hall 2000) British women develop feelings of sympathy for the unfortunate Indian females, who need their help to be saved from their destiny. Christian religion appears to missionaries –especially to female missionaries who were allowed into zenanas- as the key that could bring Indian females to emancipate themselves from the brutality of pagan worship and male domination. From a different perspective, also feminism encourages solidarity with Indian women, designing another role for British women, who could imagine themselves "as saviours of supposedly victimized Indian women". (Midgley 2007: 11) For this reason, the zenana is a crucial space, a battleground of identities and knowledge politics, much more than the space of an anthropological comparison between the condition of Indian native women and of memsahibs. As a consequence, among other things, the analysis of the representations of the zenana, gives the opportunity to investigate British women's activism on imperial issues and the ambiguities entangled in this engagement.

In order to explore how British representations of the zenana and of Indian gender relations share the complexities of colonial discourses, this article examines a selection of texts of a variety of genres, published in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In particular reference will be made to two novels in which the zenana is represented as a despicable example of corrupted customs. In one case the narrative is conditioned by a strong feeling of islamophobia (Brenda's Experiment), while in the other (Tales of the Zenana; or, A Nuwab's leisure hours) exoticism drives the representation of the harem at the disposal of the protagonist. Interestingly, the stereotype of the lecherous oriental portrayed by Hockley cannot completely conceal the male gaze of the narrator, who condemns the Nuwab for 'collecting' women in his zenana, but at the same time seems to enjoy the same fantasy of absolute control on the Nuwab's wives. A third novel is considered, to give voice to the Anglo-Indian perspective of J.F. Fanthorne, whose *Mariam*, published in India and based on a true story, means to balance the conventional stereotypes of female oppression and subjugation in the zenana. The analysis of Emma Pitman's missionary account supports the investigation of the complexity of British women's involvement in the imperial enterprise.

The fact that representations of zenana can be found in novels, missionary accounts, diaries and feminists writings, is an evidence of the relevance of the topic in Victorian imagination. The samples examined here confirm that British descriptions of the Muslim and in the Hindu household deploy gender stereotypical views that concern both male and female Indians and disclose the authors' cultural preconceptions, although existing bias are never acknowledged. Although springing from a common cultural background that blends disdain and contempt with the fascination for the hidden life that goes on behind the walls of the house, the British representations of the Indian female world deploy a whole range of attitudes, depending on the authors and also on the audience addressed. The analysis of the texts considered supports the hypothesis that the representations of zenana reassert the imperialistic cultural tenets of the colonial world and of the metropolitan world and at the same time reveal the complications and ambiguities inherent in the Victorian imperialist epistemic perspective.

2. Islamophobia and the exotic

A very hostile, Islamophobic, portrait of the zenana life can be found in Henry Martineau Greenhow's novel *Brenda's Experiment* (1896), a narrative that describes how the male Muslim protagonist has duped the English woman he has married and imposed her a secluded life.

The author, Henry Martineau Greenhow, is not a professional writer, but a surgeon in the Indian Medical Service who spent in India more than twenty years of professional life and later turned to literature with a few novels. The novelist is nephew of the famous journalist and social reformer Harriet Martineau, although he has far more conservative views than his aunt. It is not unusual in British colonial literature to find amateur authors as it should not be forgotten that literature is part of the cultural background of the middle class and its exercise is regarded as a prestigious activity that qualifies a gentleman. It is especially the colonial setting that endows these writers with the authorial authority that empowers them to describe a part of the non-British world to a British audience that ranges from the family circle to a proper reading public. These writers, as much as their readers, are certain that British culture endows any of his member with sufficient intellectual instruments to interpret India or other non-European places. In this way, the question of 'competence' or specialization may easily be overcome without even being perceived as a problem. Writers may act as anthropologists, linguists, historians, botanists, etc. tapping into whatever discipline they need, sometimes sealing it with their own experience, but never questioning either their skills or the cultural, epistemological assumptions that back their understanding of reality and their writing strategies. In other words these narratives, be it artless accounts of the author's colonial experiences or pure fictions, reflect the British intellectual confidence, a mainstream thought only very rarely put under scrutiny.

Published in 1896, *Brenda's Experiment* is the story of a young British woman, Brenda Mogadore, who after marrying a Muslim man, Ameer Ali, is cast into the unhappy role of the Muslim wife. The novel's title reflects how this interracial marriage is framed as an 'experiment', whose risks seem clear from the very beginning to everybody but Brenda and her parents. Brenda's proves to be an ill-fated match. In fact, while Ali initially presents himself as a liberal-minded convert to Christianity, it soon becomes clear that this is a ruse to bring the young woman in his power. Immediately after he has settled with his bride in Rownpore, he reveals his true nature and his intention to insert in the harem or zenana, a second wife. She should replace Brenda, promised by Ammer Ali as a gift to his high-status cousin, the Nawab. The novel's male protagonist shows several of the stereotypical features that are often considered as a specific trait of the natives: he has a duplicitous character, his and his religion's morality are debased, he is sexually aggressive and has no respect for women. At the same time, on the British end, the novel helps affirming the aristocratic chivalric ethos of the British white male characters who criticize Brenda's choice, succeeding in showing a male identity alternative to the Indians'. The zenana is depicted as a prison from which Brenda should be rescued, since it is the symbol of Indian women's commodification as sexual objects.

It is interesting to observe how the reviews of the novel appreciate the plot without questioning the image of the zenana, but find the protagonist excessively ruthless and vicious, even to an Indian standard. The magazine *Hearth and Home* noted that, while the narrative was 'readable and entertaining', Greenhow had made 'the Oriental' (Ali) 'such a brute that no woman could have been happy with him, whatever his race, rank, or religion' (An. April 1896). Similarly, the *Speaker* deemed the book 'readable and interesting', but complained that 'we should like [...] to meet in fiction with a Mahomedan who was not a villain' (An. March 1896). Henry Martineau Greenhow's treatment of race is crude and even some contemporaries found it objectionable. However, even the novel's detractors seem more worried about the plausibility of the narration rather than outraged by the author's despicable prejudice.

Certainly less hostile and islamophobic, but not less biased in dealing with the zenana and male identities is William Browne Hockley's *Tales of the Zenana; or, A Nuwab's leisure hours*. (1874) Compared to *Brenda's Experiment*, this narrative shows another series of Orientalist predictable stereotypes and succeeds in the process of 'othering' the Indian colonial subject, although in a different way. Once more the author is a non-professional writer. Hockley is a Bombay Civil servant –more specifically a judge- who has turned to literature after retiring from service. His narrative encompasses a number of tales, told by different characters, somehow in the style of the *Arabian Nights*. As hinted by the title, in this sketch of Indian life, the zenana is the stereotypical stage of the sexual life of the

Nuwab, since it is described as the part of palace where the prince spends much of his time and energy in his leisure time. The beautiful and numerous women who live in the zenana are a sort of 'collection' meant to satisfy the protagonist's vanity and sexual appetites. The reader learns that: "Business was daily attended to by the Nuwab, but his chief care was his Zenana, or women's apartments; not that he passed more of his time in that wing of the palace than any other great potentate similarly situated, but he conceived his dignity and state would be appreciated by the number of females within his walls. Under this absurd and erroneous supposition, he spared neither time, trouble, nor expense to complete the establishment of his serraglio. Emissaries were dispatched to Persia, Circassia, Delhi and many other places to procure ladies for his harem, and after sometimes he was gratified by beholding under his roof three hundred of the fairest women that Asia could produce...". (Hockley 1874:3) According to this narrative, the women are showcased and caged to please the Nawab and celebrate his private and public identity. Despite the light tone of the tale, the reader is confirmed in the most blunt, stereotypical view of the harem and of its owner. However, the narrator's condescendence towards the protagonist Jelal-ed-deen cannot dissimulate the complicity of his gaze, clearly male. In fact, one suspects that the narrator would like very much to be in the position to emulate the Nawab. The white man's moral and racial superiority falters under a gender attitude that shares the idea of men's right to have women at their disposal. The feminization of the colonial landscape suggests that the British construction of male identity does not exclude some overlapping with the Indian male subject, when the definition of virility is at stake. Obviously at the expense of women whatever their national or racial belonging. This hedonistic and chauvinist idea of the life in the zenana exercised a constant fascination for the West, continuously suggesting the juxtaposition of dancing girls, courtesans, wives and daughters, whose roles shift from one to the other.

3. The white women's burden

Missionaries' reports and feminist writing suggest different representations and interpretations of the zenana. Both Victorian missionaries and feminists shared disdain for the harem, seen as a place of seclusion and degradation for women. Emma Raymond Pitman, herself a zenana missionary, describes the life in the zenana in her *Indian Zenana Missions*, a personal record, rather than an essay- published in London probably in 1890. Pitman moves from a definition of the word Zenana:

"It may not be out of place here to say a word as to the derivation of the term 'Zenana'. It is derived from two Mohammedan words, signifying 'The place of the women'. This term, however, is not used in every part of India, although so familiar to us; other terms are used, such as 'purdah', 'gosha', and 'anthakar'; but each of these signifies the same thing, 'curtained women' and the place of their seclusion. In Bengal, as we have said, this seclusion is most rigidly maintained in the case of the more wealthy classes; but the women of the poorer classes must of necessity have more freedom, because of their having to perform the household duties; and in the southern Provinces of India the females possess still more liberty, although, to a certain extent, the system is carried out. The wives of the agricultural classes cannot be confined so strictly, so that they enjoy more liberty to come and go, but their oppression, contemptuous treatment, and bitter lot are precisely the same." (Pitman 1890:16-17)

Pitman's interesting account of the zenana does not comply to Orientalism, but supports the stereotype of the prison. However, in some respect, the representation of Indian women given by this woman missionary –with its precise references to class and caste differences- evokes Gayathri Spivak's concept of the 'subaltern' as someone who is not only 'subjected' to someone else, but who cannot speak for herself (Spivak 1988). Indian women are not only excluded from public life, but also from medical treatments and from any kind of education that may induce them to question their position. At the same time, they are subjected to cruel domestic customs, of which suttee is the best known, but not the only one. Among their oppressors there are not only husbands and brothers, but also the Brahmins, who give a religious motivation to women's unequal condition "founded upon the doctrine of the transmigration of souls. They (each woman), together with 'the diseased, maimed, and infidels', are disgraced in this life in consequence of the sin committed in a former life. Thus, by this false teaching, a reason is found for the existence of the wrong as well as an argument for its continuance." (Pitman 1890: 18)

As inequality is rooted in religious creed, according to Pitman it would hardly be possible for Indian women to achieve any kind of empowerment without external help and without an alternative religion: “Unregarded and unhelped, the women of India fellow-subjects of our own Queen obtain no redress, no amelioration of their lot, except by means of the Gospel of the grace of God. And this must be carried to them by women”. (Pitman 1890:18)

The missionary firmly believes that any improvement of Indian subcontinent cannot but start from women, first for they are the only ones who have access to the zenana, second because no progress may ignore half the population. As a consequence, the Indian female subject assigns a value to white British women in the first place, at last giving them a role as irreplaceable bearer of civilization and progress. The same reversal between benefactor and beneficiary is suggested when the question of the Indian women’s voice is raised more explicitly in the text. Pitman maintains that Indian women can learn to speak for themselves if somebody teaches them how. She brings the example of a woman who wondering what her husband finds in books, taught to read, starts understanding not just writings and books, but a more revolutionary idea: she becomes aware that she is not intellectually different from her husband. Here the missionary’s account opens to all question about subalternity raised by Spivak’s theory. To what degree does the Indian woman find her voice? Is it still her voice if the words she pronounces are her missionary-savior’s? Pitman uses direct speech, but the Indian woman is subjected to the author’s authority, despite all claims of truth in relating the episode. There is no way out of this ambiguity: the British missionary women want to fight heathen beliefs, want Indian women to resemble British women. Pitman’s ventriloquism is more than a simple suspicion of an umpteenth act of colonial exploitation. At the same time, it should be noted that Pitman’s account does not say –or even dare to imagine- what is this woman going to do with her knowledge and her voice, as if she could also refrain from exploring the consequences of her pupil’s newly acquired ‘agency’.

The question of female ‘agency’ is equally important for subaltern subjects such as British and Indian women are, although in different ways. For sure, Pitman rejoices of her own ‘agency’ as a missionary who has conquered – and the military metaphor includes all colonial ambiguities-the fortress of the zenana, otherwise inexpugnable to male colonizers. Being the only ones admitted to the zenana, the task of bringing change to Indian women and to their frame of mind can be accomplished only by British female missionaries, whose empowerment cannibalistically feeds of Indian women. Thus, once more the zenana and its gender relations are exploited by white subjects as a source of identity. Indian Zenana missionaries in Pitman’s narration and not only there, acquire the status of heroines, bearers of a specific mission of civilization and take agency inside –not outside- the colonial discourse.

In fact, even feminists’ solidarity to those they consider as unfortunate women living in the uttermost regions of the Empire is not exempt from ambiguity and complicity with the colonial discourse. Female empathy and support are grounded exactly in notions of moral and racial superiority, not at all different from those preached by British male colonizers. Antoinette Burton in her *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* explains how Indian native women have become a ‘white women’s burden’, With this in mind, feminists’ equality fights leans on images of an enslaved and primitive ‘Oriental womanhood’. Liberation to the Indian women imprisoned in the zenana will be brought by their emancipated British ‘sisters’.

4. An Anglo-Indian perspective on the zenana

It is worth mentioning one more representation of the life of the zenana, that explicitly aims at redressing the negative visions of the examples mentioned here, replacing a positive, sympathetic view of the Indian women’s hidden lives. J.F.Fanthorne, in his novel *Mariam: a story of the Indian Mutiny of 1857*, published in Benares in 1896, claims to have fictionalized the true facts concerning the women of the Lavater family. In the novel, the female members of an Anglo-Indian family are hosted in Mangal Khan’s zenana, after the death of Mr. Lavater, slaughtered at the beginning of the 1857 uprising. Thanks to this gesture, the female characters are saved by sure death by a Muslim man –Mangal Khan- who almost completely reverse the stereotype of the lustful villain. Mangal Khan would like to marry Mariam’s daughter, including her in his harem, but always respects her (and finally accepts) her stubborn refusal. The story of the Lavater women, gives Fanthorne the opportunity to describe the

zenana life with a sympathetic eye. In the Preface to the novel he declares: "In the following pages an attempt has been made to give occasional peeps to the life of the Zanana – a life which is correct and purer by far than is generally supposed. The story of 'Mariam's trials reveals some of the most beautiful traits of character in both the Hindu and the Mohammadan..." (Fanthorne, 1896:3)

The novel deploys all the author's good intentions to show that Indian women are loved in their household, as they would be in any British family. Mangal Khan constantly shows consideration for them and for their opinions and the zenana appears as a place where feelings and affections govern personal relations. Alongside, in Mariam, Indian male characters are never described as lascivious and despotic domestic tyrants: they are respectful and protective. Fanthorne openly asserts that historical objectivity and correctness are at the basis of his description of Indian gender relations, which do not match the most trite stereotyped accounts: "My business is to portray [their social customs] as faithfully as possible from a study of the inscrutable microcosm, the Zanana of a respectable Mohammedan native, without obtruding my own judgement upon their correctness or otherwise" (Fanthorne 1896:3) Still, it is fair to say that also Fanthorne's novel is not exempt from some form of colonial prejudice and 'epistemic violence'. For example, Mangal is depicted as respectable, but also as a superstitious man, whose limits prevent him to be considered as equal to a British. In the same way, the rebellion is strongly criticized by the narrator and is described as an irrational explosion of violence that reveals the worst qualities of the natives. But perhaps the most interesting ambiguity shown by this Anglo-Indian novel is to be found in the use of the theme of disguise, rather frequent in Indian colonial literature. In fact, in many British novels set in India, the hero may act as a spy on Indian culture and cross the boundary of Indian customs, coloring his skin, dressing as a native and perfectly mastering the language to the point to be mistaken with an Indian by other natives. (Chakravarty 2006: 167) This is a way to display the superiority of the colonizer, whose knowledge of the colonized subject supposedly exceeds his self-knowledge. Clearly, the reverse is never possible and no fictional situation ever imagines that Indians may simulate to be British, if only because of complexion. In this novel, the Lavater women, who speak Urdu perfectly, can mimic the Zenana life, to the point of conversing and making friend with the other Indian women. According to the novel, partly, the Lavater behave in this way to save their lives, but partly find a true comradeship in the women of Mangal Khan's family, and are relatively happy in the zenana which is neither a prison, nor a space of humiliation. There is an effort to support the verisimilitude of the story since the protagonists are Anglo-Indian, but the situation is deliberately naturalized. Hence, on the one hand the novel succeeds in redressing a biased idea of the zenana offering an insider's perspective; on the other hand, the novel takes for granted the white females capacity to relate to the native women without problems. The logocentric western assumption that English people may adopt mimetic behaviors is a sophisticated, even if unconscious, strategy that elicit beliefs deeply embedded in the colonialist frame of mind. Fanthorne certainly thinks outside the box, if compared to his contemporaries, but is bound to share the same epistemic coordinates. Mariam's representation of the zenana is quite interesting not only because it challenges some stereotyped views, but also because it betrays the density of the colonial discourse.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the representations of the zenana included in the selection of texts examined in this article, despite its limitation, gives a clear idea of the relevance of the zenana in Victorian imagination. More than an object of interest and curiosity, of historical and anthropological study, the zenana emerges as a social practice that solicits the British cultural construction in many ways. It is not by chance that nineteenth century representations of the zenana display nuanced insights and articulate a variety of features. In some cases, as in Greenhow Martineau's novel, this symbol of diversity produces a reaction of racist contempt, especially when it offers the opportunity to express the rancorous islamophobia that pervades a part of the British public opinion. The condemnation of the Indian women's condition generates a feeling of superiority that produces (and relies on) sensationalized descriptions of Indian savagery. At the same time, the practice of female seclusion also fascinates for its exotic diversity, eliciting different, duplicitous reactions. Hockley's condemnation of the Indian segregation of women, goes hand in hand with some thinly-disguised male fantasies of control of women, that are a symptom of the sexist and patriarchal traits of British culture.

Nonetheless, this light, almost humorous representation of the zenana shares the same the chivalric ethos at the basis of stronger criticisms of the zenana.(Paxton1996) British male identity finds one of its *raison d'être* in conceiving of white women as continuously threatened by sexually aggressive Indians and as damsels in distress who need to be rescued. When represented inside a zenana, Indian women at least partially partake of the identity of their white counterpart, even if, simultaneously, they may be regarded as courtesans and lovers. In fact, on the one hand ideological constructions are not exempt from contradictions, on the other it should be remembered that mixed married couples were common in the eighteenth century India, although they had virtually disappeared by the middle of the nineteenth century, with the rise of Victorian Evangelicals.(Dalrymple 2002)

Even more challenging questions arise when the zenana is represented by women. The rhetoric used is equally inscribed in imperial ideology. The zenana is identified as the last outpost of Indian resistance to colonization, the space of female oppression and a battleground of emancipation, but the Indian (heathen) sisters' freedom becomes functional to claim the place British missionaries and British women think they deserve in the Imperial enterprise. Christian religion and the universal values implicit in the idea of the emancipation of women as a common cause are instrumental to reassert the need of the British civilizing mission within the empire, disclosing the bias hidden in any essentialist identity construction. The 'imperial embrace' the entangles the Indian women and Victorian female missionaries and feminists, no less than Fanthorne's attempt to offer an alternative view of the zenana, reveal all its intricacies and its contradictions.

The examples examined indicate that the Victorians represent the zenana as a *sincedochic* microcosm that may be twisted to many vested interests. Specific bias are disclosed by the rhetorical strategies used to underscore the features that best serve the authorial implicit or explicit cause. In no case the complexity of colonial discourse can be erased, since representations of the zenana entail the epistemic basis of colonial discourse and disclose its politics of knowledge, continuously challenging the theoretical frames that we may use to discuss it.

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