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**Women, Gender, Emotions: Rethinking
Meerut in 1857**

William R. Pinch

Department of History, Wesleyan University, USA



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NMML Occasional Paper



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Women, Gender, Emotions: Rethinking Meerut in 1857*

William R. Pinch

Abstract

In the present essay I examine an event that has become a staple of the narrative of the “Sepoy Mutiny of 1857”, namely, the humiliating taunts leveled at the soldiers of the 3rd Light Cavalry and 20th Native Infantry by women of the “Sadr Bazaar” in Meerut on the 9th of May. In addition to attempting to reconstruct the event itself and determine the identity of the women, insofar as it is possible to do so at a distance of a century and a half, I also trace the evolution of the representation of the event (and the women involved) in the historical literature. The aim of the essay is not simply to argue for the importance of women in 1857, but to reflect on the wider questions of gender that shaped the uprising and continue to animate its remembered meanings. I also argue that the events of 9–10 May 1857 suggest that the cantonment—not just Meerut, but all north Indian cantonments—constituted a kind of “emotional topography”, and that we cannot understand “the Mutiny” absent a detailed understanding of that topography, especially insofar as it was shaped by gender, honour, and humiliation.

* This essay, part of a larger work on cantonment culture in the mid-nineteenth century, has been presented on three occasions: in the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library seminar, 19 April 2013; the Wesleyan University Faculty Luncheon, 1 December 2014; and the Johns Hopkins University History Department seminar, 20 April 2015. I am grateful for the opportunity to share my work and for the responses and suggestions I received at each event. Specific debts are acknowledged in the footnotes.

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Beginnings

In the year '14 the war began at Meerut.
 Bombay, Madras and Bengal are great presidencies.
 When the time of destruction came, the English lost their
 heads.
 Kali wished to sink England.
 The cartridges were of cow and pig fat:
 When the soldiers heard of it they threw off their uniforms.
 Saith Dhawal Ram: 'In the year fourteen have the English
 fled and deserted Calcutta'.¹

On the 10th of May 1857 (1914, according to the *Vikrami Samvat* calendar) the 3rd Light Cavalry and the 20th Native Infantry, plus part of a third regiment, the 11th Native Infantry, rose up, killed several of their officers, burned their regimental “lines” (or huts, arranged in lines), and marched off to Delhi to wage war against the Company. Much additional killing and mayhem occurred in Meerut on the night of the 10th May at the hands of a mob that emanated from the “*sadr bazaar*”, or the main bazaar serving the cantonment. Meerut represented, thus, the first British blood spilled during the events that would come to be remembered variously as “the Sepoy Mutiny”, the Great Rebellion of 1857, and India’s First War of Independence. Dhawal Ram, quoted above, understood the significance of Meerut for 1857, and no doubt his was a widely shared apprehension.

But why did the Meerut *sipahis*—or, actually, the *sipahis* (infantrymen, or sepoy) and *sawars* (cavalrymen)—suddenly decide to cross the Rubicon on 10 May 1857? Was it, as Dhawal Ram tells us, because the “cartridges were of cow and pig fat”

¹ William Crooke, “Songs of the Mutiny,” part II, *Indian Antiquary*, June 1911, p. 165. According to Crooke, this was “[s]ung during the Mutiny and repeated by Râmeswar Dayâl Misrâ of Kotârâ, District Itâwâ. Recorded by Raghunandas, a teacher in the Kotârâ School”. Crooke provides the Hindi (transliterated into Roman characters) as well as a literal translation. For a more stylized translation see *1857 in Folk Songs*, compiled and edited by Puran Chand Joshi (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1994), p. 7.

that they “threw off their uniforms”? Not exactly. It is true that two weeks earlier eighty-five “skirmishers” of the 3rd Bengal Light Cavalry had refused to touch the cartridges during a “firing drill” that had been ordered by their commanding officer, Colonel Carmichael-Smyth, and this constituted a formal mutiny in his eyes and, ultimately, the eyes of the “native” officers that later presided over the eventual court martial. Similar mutinies had taken place in the Bengal Army in the previous months. The eighty-five skirmishers were duly convicted and then subjected to a humiliating “ironing parade” on the 9th May, during which they were stripped of their uniforms, placed in irons, and marched off to prison. But despite their emotional distress, they had marched off in a more or less orderly fashion, even saluting some of their officers—though not, apparently, Carmichael-Smyth. Meanwhile their regimental brothers in arms, the men who had *not* been court-martialled and paraded in irons, but who had been forced to watch the humiliation of their eighty-five comrades, decided sometime during the night of May 9th to take matters into their own hands. They rose up on the late afternoon of the 10th—thus starting the “The Mutiny”, “1857”, and the “first war of Independence”.

As noted above, the Meerut rebels torched their lines, killed many of their officers, and then headed south to Delhi to enlist the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, as their leader. For his part, the Mughal emperor was dismayed at their precipitous behaviour and questioned them in the palace. Here is how an eyewitness or near eyewitness, Zahir Dehlavi, remembered the cavalymen’s explanation:

Then when we entered the jailhouse in Meerut camp there was total mayhem and there was speculation in and consultation among every household. Especially among a distinct community of veiled women there have always been some who were foolish and short-sighted. They never foresaw the consequences [of their actions]. Most of these women were those whose men had been imprisoned. By using insulting language and taunts they fanned mischief and mutiny, and their sharp tongues worked like fuel on fire. At



this point the epic chaos of Rahu ensued.² Those women started to taunt the men, “you are all men and profess to be soldiers, but [in fact] you are shameless cowards, without honor. We women are better than you[.] Are you not ashamed that right in front of you your officers were shackled and handcuffed, and you stood by watching and could do nothing? Here, take these bangles and wear them, and give the weapons to us[;] we will liberate the officers”. Those seditious words led to further escalation, and among the regiments of the entire army, zeal, a cry of manliness, and a fire of masculinity exploded, and [the men] were ready to kill and be killed, and together they decided that in the morning they would break into the jailhouse and free the officers of the army. This is how it came to happen. In the morning the footsoldiers and cavalrymen of the army prepared for battle³ and climbed onto the jailhouse and broke it open and rescued 84 officers and broke their handcuffs and shackles.⁴

² Lit., “the essence of true form of the Divan-e Rahu came forth”. Rahu is a demigod who causes eclipses and ushers in chaos—this may refer as well to the couplet with which this section begins. One might interpret this line to mean “the world was turned upside down”.

³ Lit., “tightened their belts”.

⁴ Zahir Dehlvi, *Dastan-i-Ghadar* (Lahore, 2007), p. 47. I am grateful to Sonal Singh, Assistant Professor of History at Ramjas College, for her invaluable help in transcribing and translating the Urdu passage. Compare the translation in *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh* [hereafter *FSUP*], vol. I, ed. S.A.A. Rizvi (New Delhi, 1957), p. 406: “...the Meerut Camp was in a state of great commotion. In every house there was a discussion about this [the fate of the eighty-five skirmishers]. Particularly the ladies were most zealous and those whose men were sent to gaol were most vociferous, (in their protestations). They mocked and jeered at the sepoy saying, ‘Give us your arms: we shall fight and liberate the brave officers who have been confined to gaol. You can keep inside the home and can put on bangles.’ Those taunts spurred all the sepoy and they decided to stake their lives on liberating the imprisoned officers. In the night, foot-soldiers and horse-men, joining hands, raided the gaol, opened its doors and liberated the officers. The other prisoners—bad characters confined in the gaol—were also set free. The Government now ordered the white soldiers to get armed with their artillery and to charge us. The whole night, we fought them. In the morning we started towards Delhi and with forced marches reached this place after covering a distance of 30

Dehlavi was a young palace courtier and eventually escaped from Delhi; he wrote the account at the end of his life in Hyderabad nearly five decades later, as part of a memoir of the rebellion, later published as *Dastan-e Ghadr*.⁵ However a similar tale was told in late December 1858 by J. Cracroft Wilson of Moradabad District (east of Meerut). The context of Wilson's report is significant, as he was convinced that a province-wide uprising was supposed to have occurred three weeks later, on 31 May—also a Sunday—during which “all European functionaries” were to be murdered and the reins of government seized by the rebels, all in one fell swoop. However, according to Wilson's theory, the rush of events in Meerut conspired to force the premature eruption of violence. Notable among those events was the merciless taunting of the soldiers by the women of the bazaar on the night of the 9th May. As a result of the premature eruption, according to Wilson, the British were able to prepare for subsequent mutinies in the other cantonments and, over time, send reinforcements and relief columns into Hindustan. Thus the women of the bazaar inadvertently helped to doom the rebellion to failure.

Wilson did not indicate in his report what his sources were. He simply stated that his convictions were based on his “[c]arefully collating oral information with facts as they occurred”. Inasmuch as Wilson's version became the Ur-text for almost all subsequent British historical narratives concerning the crucial role of bazaar women in Meerut in 1857, I reproduce it here in its entirety.

From this combined and simultaneous massacre on the 31st May, 1857, we were, humanly speaking, saved by Lieutenant-Colonel Smyth, commanding the 3rd Regiment of Bengal Light Cavalry, *and the frail ones of the Meerut*

Kos”. (Emphasis in Rizvi's translation.) Rizvi's version is based on the 1955 Urdu edition of Dehlavi's book, which is essentially identical to the 2007 edition used here. I discuss Rizvi below.

⁵ On Dehlavi, see William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty: Delhi 1857*, New York: Knopf, 2007, pp. 17ff., 30.

bazaar. Colonel Smyth had been engaged at the Hurdwar fair as president of a committee for passing remounts into the public service. On his return to the head-quarters of his regiment, he found that some dissatisfaction had been expressed by some of the troopers as to taking the same pistol cartridges which had been served out to the regiment for the two previous years. He insisted upon their being served out to, and taken by, the men. His order was obeyed. The men refused. A court martial was convened. Eighty-five men of the 3rd Light Cavalry were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment, and, having been put in fetters, were escorted to the Meerut jail, which is situated on the road to Delhi. *And now the frail ones' taunts were heard far and wide, and the rest of the regiment was assailed with words like these: – "Your brethren have been ornamented with these anklets and incarcerated; and for what? Because they would not swerve from their creed; and you, cowards as you are, sit still indifferent to their fate. If you had an atom of manhood in you, go and release them."* The mine had been prepared and the train had been laid, but it was not intended to light the slow-match for another three weeks. *The spark which fell from female lips ignited it at once.* Meerut was in a blaze, and the night of the 10th May, 1857, saw the commencement of a tragedy, never before witnessed since India passed under British sway.⁶

Wilson's account possesses several interesting features. Most striking, of course, is the sense of irony that permeates it: British rule in India was preserved by the premature eruption of the violence at Meerut, a premature eruption occasioned by taunts that "fell from female lips". Wilson did not make the sexual metaphor explicit, but given his phrasing it is hard to resist the

⁶J. C. Wilson, Commissioner on Special Duty, to G. F. Edmonstone, Secretary to Government, Allahabad, dated Camp Calcutta, 24 December 1858, reproduced in *FSUP*, vol. 1, p. 404. Wilson's report was originally printed as an official report from Calcutta in 1859, and later republished privately by Wilson as *Narrative of Events attending the Outbreak of Disturbances and the Restoration of Authority in the District of Moradabad, in 1857-58* (London: Anglo-American Times Press, 1871); the passage appears on p. 2. Emphasis added.

notion that he thought of this as nothing less than a premature ejaculation by undisciplined lovers. Another striking feature of the account is that Wilson described the women as “the frail ones of the Meerut bazaar”. The term “frail ones” was a common euphemism for prostitutes in the nineteenth century, along with “public women”.⁷ Dehlavi, it will be recalled, termed them “veiled women” and added that many of them were “those whose men had been imprisoned”.⁸ Another feature of Wilson’s account that prompts comparison with Dehlavi’s is that the women in both are described as employing gender inversion in their efforts to shame the soldiers. Whereas in Wilson “the frail ones” are haranguing the men with images of their disgraced comrades being forced to wear “anklets”, in Dehlavi’s account the women are shaming the remaining soldiers by instructing *them* to don bangles and cower inside their houses.

From the historian’s perspective, the shared ground of Dehlavi’s and Wilson’s accounts is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, two sources are always better than one: and, taken at face value, these two sources would seem to confirm that women did indeed play some kind of key role in sparking the uprising at Meerut—and that they did so by making recourse to gender inversion as a means of humiliation. On the other hand, neither Wilson nor Dehlavi were eyewitnesses to the tongue-lashing that the soldiers received on the night of May 9th–10th. Dehlavi was, however, a youthful attendant of the emperor, and the detailed nature of his description suggests that he was present during the speech by the soldiers.⁹ Were it not for Dehlavi, the skeptical

⁷ For example, the *Nashville Dispatch* contained a news item titled “The Frail Ones” on 13 August 1863, which gave notice that “all the public women of this city to report at the Provost Marshall’s office on or before the 15th day of August, and that on presentation of a Surgeon’s certificate and payment of five dollars, they will receive licenses”. See <http://tn.gov/tsla/cwsb/1863-08-Article-113-Page143.pdf>, accessed 1 November 2014. See also Robyn Anderson, “The Hardened Frail Ones’: Women and Crime in Auckland, 1845–1870”, M. A. Thesis, University of Auckland, 1981.

⁸ I take up this apparent discrepancy in the concluding section of the essay.

⁹ William Dalrymple writes that “despite Zahir’s grand-sounding official title of Daroga of the Mahi Maraatib, his daily duties appear to have been relatively

reader might be inclined to treat Wilson's narrative about the "frail ones of the Meerut bazaar" as the workings of an overheated British imagination eager to bolster his wider (and subsequently discredited) conspiracy theory with a dramatic tale of premature eruption. This doesn't necessarily mean, however, that Dehlavi's remembered dialogue was not subject to its own ideological distortions—to say nothing of the effects of the ravages of time. Dehlavi's account of the brutality of the rebels and of his own suffering makes clear that he found the rebels' behaviour distasteful in the extreme, and he could not but recall many years later that their arrival in Delhi marked the beginning of the end of his world (and the death of many loved ones). Might this have coloured his recollections of the mutineers' behaviour and prompted a desire to discredit the claim that they were fighting to defend their religion?¹⁰ Possibly, but the fact that both accounts point to the key role of bazaar women, and that both portray those bazaar women as having invoked gender inversion to spur the men to action, would seem to confirm beyond a reasonable doubt the veracity of the tale.

humble and he was in effect the Emperor's page or ADC". Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857*, New Delhi: Viking Penguin, 2006, 30 (footnote). For other passages by Dehlavi describing the arrival of the mutineers at the palace, see pp. 156–57 and pp. 170–71. Though Dalrymple found Dehlavi's account to be "the most detailed" and "particularly credible" for the morning of the 11th May (516 n2) he does not include Dehlavi's description of the soldiers' speech to the emperor (which occurred in the afternoon) in his work. Instead he quotes (p. 172) the statement of Ghulam Abbas, the emperor's wakil, who described the cavalry officers mentioning only the greased cartridges as the reason for their decision to revolt. For the full text of Ghulam Abbas' statement at the trial of the emperor the following year, see Pramod K. Nayar (ed.), *The Trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar*, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007, pp. 10–13.

¹⁰ Cf. Rajat Kanta Ray, *The Felt Community: Commonalty and Mentality before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 407 and pp. 505–506 n257. As far as I am aware, Ray and S.A.A. Rizvi (see above, note 5) are the only ones to have included both Wilson and Dehlavi as sources for the involvement of the bazaar women of Meerut on 9–10 May 1857. Both, it should be noted, treat the two accounts as independent sources that confirm the historicity of the event (though Rizvi only implicitly so).

It is also possible that the two accounts are connected, that is, that one is the source for the other. Recall, in this context, Wilson's brief allusion to his sources as "oral information [collated] with facts as they occurred". Was Dehlavi a source for Wilson? Anything is possible, but this seems unlikely. Dehlavi himself could be counted among the "pro-British loyalists at court", but when the British retook the city in mid-September it became clear that anyone connected to the court, even those who were pro-British, were being targeted. He observed that, "We heard that the spies who had been supporting the English were now continuing to work as informers, helping them to loot and kill and find people to hang, for which they received two rupees for each name...." As a result it was decided that he and his brother should separate from the family and make their own way out of the city. This would begin a painful odyssey that would take him across north India and eventually to Jaipur and thence to the Nizam's court at Hyderabad, where he would subsist on his talents as a calligrapher and writer.¹¹

Then there is the reverse possibility, namely, that Wilson (or one or more of the several writers that I discuss below, who drew on Wilson for their own accounts of the Meerut uprising) was a source for Dehlavi. This is harder to determine, but it also seems unlikely if for no other reason than the discrepancies between his account and Wilson's (or those descending from Wilson)—first, concerning who was (or should be) donning bangles and anklets, and second, concerning the "respectability" of the women. Short of finding Dehlavi's notes, or a third corroborating eyewitness account, or an account that somehow refutes both Dehlavi and Wilson (with all the usual caveats about the difficulty

¹¹ Dehlavi, *Dastan i-Ghadr*, p. 128, quoted in Dalrymple, *Last Mughal*, pp. 388–389. For Dehlavi's escape from Delhi, his and his family's suffering, and his subsequent life, see also Dalrymple, *Last Mughal*, pp. 358–60, 372–75, 387, 421–22, 426. As Dalrymple notes (p. 421), "death was the usual punishment meted out to courtiers if they were caught. Zahir Dehlavi was aware of this and kept moving on as fast as he could to avoid capture". After narrowly escaping a British force at Jhajjar, he was nearly executed by a rebel force at Bareilly until a friend recognized him at the last minute.



of proving a negative), we are unlikely to resolve this issue. What we can be certain of is that both Dehlavi and Wilson found it entirely plausible that the events at Meerut were sparked by the taunts leveled by women somehow connected to the men of the 3rd Light Cavalry and 20th Native Infantry. As will be made clear in the pages that follow, many others did as well.

For subsequent generations of historians, the role of the bazaar women at Meerut became something of a staple of the wider 1857 narrative.¹² And since Wilson was the principal source for most writers, the women are almost invariably described as courtesans or prostitutes. Here, for example, is how the scene was recently described for popular audiences:

The 85 sepoy were taken into custody and confined to a hospital during their court martial. For punishment, on May 9 they were taken to the Parade Ground, where they were stripped of their uniforms and fitted with leg irons. Then they were marched 3 km to the new jail, which is known as Victoria Park today. ... The alleys of the crowded Sadar Bazaar area also tell their own tales. The prostitutes of this market taunted the Indian soldiers for failing to save their 85 comrades from humiliation. That added strength to a rumor that the British forces were going to disarm the 'native troops', and that sparked an uproar. Indian soldiers started attacking Englishmen.

This description is from a panel display called "Kranti se Gandhi", or "From Revolution to Gandhi," at the Gandhi Memorial Museum on Tees January Marg in New Delhi.¹³ The display, which consists of a series of twenty or so large laminated poster boards that combine narrative with images, stands along

¹² Though there were exceptions; see below for discussion of S.N. Sen and R.C. Majumdar in 1957. Mention of the bazaar women is also absent from J.A.B. Palmer's detailed account of Meerut, *The Mutiny Outbreak at Meerut in 1857*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966; see esp. pp. 68–73 and p. 133, where Palmer discusses (and dismisses) Wilson's premature eruption theory.

¹³ Visited twice to examine the display, on 5 January 2013 and 16 March 2014.



one side of the garden in which Mohandas K. Gandhi was gunned down on 30 January 1948.¹⁴

Narratives

It did not take long for the women of Meerut to enter the secondary historical record. The first published narrative history to feature them was John Kaye's four-volume *History of the Sepoy War in India, 1857-1858*.¹⁵ In volume two of this work, published in 1864, Kaye described the scene as follows:

The 3rd Cavalry were naturally the most excited of all. Eighty-five of their fellow-soldiers were groaning in prison. Sorrow, shame, and indignation were strong within them for their comrades' sake, and terror for their own. *They had been taunted by the courtesans of the Bazaar, who asked if they were men to suffer their comrades to wear such anklets of iron**; and they believed that what they had seen on the day before was but a foreshadowing of a greater cruelty to come.¹⁶

¹⁴ Though it may at first appear incongruous that a shrine to mark the murder of India's "apostle of nonviolence" would celebrate such a bloody chapter in South Asian history as 1857, it so happens that anxieties about gender and masculinity were bubbling just below the surface for Gandhi's assassin as well. See Ashis Nandy, "Final Encounter: The Politics of the Assassination of Gandhi", in Ashis Nandy, *At the Edge of Psychology: Essays in Politics and Culture*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980, pp. 70–98.

¹⁵ John Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War in India, 1857–1858*, 4 vols. (London, 1864–1876). Emphasis added. This was later revised and continued by Colonel G. B. Malleson and published in six volumes in 1888–1889. The bazaar women episode is not mentioned in two summary narratives that appeared soon after the uprising, namely, Charles Ball, *The History of the Indian Mutiny*, 2 vols., London: London Printing and Publishing Company, 1858, see vol. 1, pp. 55–56; and Rev. J. Cave-Brown, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857, being a narrative of the measures by which the Punjab was saved and Delhi recovered during the Indian mutiny*, 2 vols., London: Blackwood, 1861, see vol. 1, pp. 52–53.

¹⁶ Kaye, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 42. Emphasis in original.

Kaye's source for this passage, which he identifies in footnote 41 (where I have placed an asterisk), was the official report by Wilson. The wording of Kaye's reference to Wilson suggests that he was conscious of the possibility that assigning such a key role in the rebellion to courtesans of the bazaar might occasion some eye-rolling skepticism on the part of his readers. Thus he was careful to point out in the note that "This is stated very distinctly by Mr. J.C. Wilson (an excellent authority) in his interesting Muradabad Report". Kaye then proceeded to quote from the relevant section of that report in the remainder of the footnote—though he avoided the question of a wider conspiracy and whether the Meerut uprising constituted a premature eruption that thwarted it.

G.B. Malleson, who issued an expanded version of Kaye's work in 1888–89 (retaining Kaye's original language regarding Meerut), would himself decide to leave out of his own extremely successful if controversial one-volume history (1891) any reference to the role of the bazaar women.¹⁷ Possibly he felt their inclusion would undercut his larger argument—and the basis of the controversy that surrounded the book—that the uprising was not spontaneous but the result of a carefully hatched conspiracy, in which the Maulvi of Faizabad, the Rani of Jhansi, and the Nana Saheb of Bithur took leading roles. If so, this was an ironic choice, given that Wilson had understood the agency of the bazaar women of Meerut as a key factor in explaining the very failure of that conspiracy.

Within five years of Malleson's account a new work would appear that would do more than any other to cement the image of the women of Meerut in the British historical understanding of 1857. Significantly, this took the form of historical fiction: Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters* (1896). Steel's book was the most popular of the "Mutiny novels" to appear in the late nineteenth century and probably was the most popular of all

¹⁷ See G. B. Malleson, *The Indian Mutiny of 1857* (London: Seeley and Col., Ltd., 1891), pp. 62–69.



time prior to John Masters' *Nightrunners of Bengal* (1952). The chapter in which Steel recounts the scene in the Meerut bazaar is entitled, with an Old Testament flourish, "The Word Went Forth". Her description of the Meerut bazaar after the ironing parade on May 9th begins in "the lane of lust", where a sepoy was visiting a bazaar prostitute—or rather, "harlot". But the woman tartly rebuffs the sepoy's advances saying, "We of the bazaar kiss no cowards." She then twists the knife, slyly asking, in reference to the eighty-five imprisoned skirmishers, "Where are your comrades?"

The man to whom she said it, a young dissolute-faced trooper, dressed in the loose rakish muslins beloved of his class—the very man, perchance, who had gone city-ward that morning, and dropped an alms into the yellow fakir's bowl—stood for a second in the stifling, maddening atmosphere of musk and rose and orange-blossom; stood before all those insolent allurements, balked in his passion, checked in his desires. Then, with an oath, he dashed from her insulting charms; dashed into the street with a cry:

"To horse! To horse, brothers! To the jail! To our comrades!"

The word had been spoken. The speech which brings more than speech, had come from the painted lips of a harlot.

The first clang of the church bell—which the chaplain had forgotten to postpone—came faintly audible across the dusty plain, making other men pause and look at each other. Why not? It was the hour of prayer—the appointed time. Their comrades could be easily rescued—there was but a native guard at the jail. And hark! from another pair of painted derisive lips came the same retort, flung from a balcony.

"*Trra! We of the bazaar kiss no cowards!*"

"To horse! To horse! Let the comrades be rescued first; and then—" ¹⁸

¹⁸ Flora Annie Steel, *On the Face of the Waters*, New York: Macmillan, 1897, pp. 190–91.

Steel spent many years in India, mostly in the Punjab where her husband was posted, and was able to do extensive research in the official records. As a result, her novel was widely praised for its historical accuracy and verisimilitude. For example, Sir George MacMunn (about whom I will have more to say below) writing in the 1920s, noted that “Mrs. Steele [sic] alone has gripped the whole story, of glory, or tragedy, the pathetic feelings of the soldiery who rued their folly, the relentless grip of the cholera-stricken and fever-gripped avengers, and this touch of the courtesans who put a torch to the fuel”.¹⁹ For her own part, Steel made it clear in her preface that she intended her book “to be at once a story and a history”. Whether it succeeded in either was “for the reader to say”, but

[a]s the writer, I have only to point out where my history ends, my story begins, and clear the way for criticism. Briefly, then, I have not allowed fiction to interfere with fact in the slightest degree. The reader may rest assured that every incident bearing in the remotest degree on the Indian Mutiny, or on the part which real men took in it, is scrupulously exact, even to the date, the hour, the scene, the very weather. *Nor have I allowed the actual actors in the great tragedy to say a word regarding it which is not to be found in the accounts of eye-witnesses, or in their own writings.*²⁰

In the case of the words of the women of Meerut, Steel’s debt to Wilson is clear. His “spark which fell from female lips” had become the basis for her artful phrases, such as, “The speech which brings more than speech, had come from the painted lips

¹⁹ Sir George MacMunn, “Mees Dolly (An Untold Tragedy of ’57),” *Cornhill Magazine* (1927), p. 330. Note, however, that Steel refers to the women not as courtesans but “harlots”.

²⁰ Steel, *On the Face of the Waters*, v. Emphasis added. As we shall see below, precisely what Steel meant by “actual actors” seems to have been aggressively misinterpreted. For a provocative reflection on history and the novel, and fact and fiction, see Jill Lepore, “Just the Facts, Ma’am: Fake memoirs, factual fictions, and the history of history”, *The New Yorker*, March 24, 2008, pp. 79–83.



of a harlot.” Or: “And hark! From another pair of painted derisive lips came the same retort, flung from a balcony.”

Wilson would soon be yoked to another immensely popular and, in its own way, romantic account of 1857—told not as a mere mutiny and civil rebellion, but as a patriotic war of Independence. V. D. Savarkar first wrote *First War of Indian Independence* in Marathi in London in 1908 and then translated it into English in the following year. Savarkar’s principal debt was, ironically, to Malleon. The latter’s anti-British conspiracy became the former’s nationalist revolution; and the nefarious conspirators became noble freedom fighters. But whereas Malleon had studiously avoided discussion of Wilson’s bazaar women, Savarkar returned them to the narrative. But rather than referring to them as courtesans, prostitutes, harlots, or “frail ones of the bazaar”, he described them simply as the “womenfolk of the town”. Thus:

This [the humiliation of the ironing parade] was in the morning. The Sepoys could not possibly control themselves any longer. They returned to their barracks, smarting inwardly under the insult and shame of seeing their brethren being imprisoned by foreigners for what was nothing more than an act of self-respect in defence of their religion. *When they strolled out in the bazaars, the women folk of the town said to them scornfully, “Your brothers are in prison, and you are lounging about here killing flies! Fie upon your life!”**How could they, already chafing under injury, hear women taunting them so in the open street, and still remain doing nothing? All over the lines that night there was a number of secret meetings of the Sepoys. Were they to wait now till the 31st of May?²¹

In footnote 3, the location of which I have marked above with an asterisk, Savarkar cites J. C. Wilson.

Did Savarkar resist the urge to refer to the bazaar women as courtesans or prostitutes so as to remain scrupulously consistent

²¹ V.D. Savarkar, *First War of Indian Independence* (first published 1909; 4th underground edition, n.d., pub. Mayuresh), p. 93. Emphasis added.

with Wilson's language? Or was he unaware of the implications of the term "frail ones"? Either is possible, though it is more likely that he was aware of the use of the term "courtesan" in Kaye and "harlot" in Steel, but felt conflicted about the prospect of India's sacred War of Independence having any connection whatever to women whom he considered morally tainted. Another instance of a similar treatment occurs later in the text, when he discusses the conspirators meeting on the banks of the Ganga near Kanpur. Afterwards one of them, Shams ud-Din, visited the house of one "Azizan", a well-known courtesan of Kanpur and supporter of the rebellion there, and reveals to her the secret plan. As Savarkar described it:

Their secrets were known to the sacred Ganges alone and in her hands they were safe! But this much is well known that, on the following day, Sham-su-ddin came to the house of his beloved Azizan and told her that within two days the Feringhis would be destroyed and India would be free! Shams ud-Din did not give this news of freedom to her as empty bravado; for, the heart of this beauty yearned as much for India's freedom as that of her brave lover. Azizan was a dancing girl very much loved by the Sepoys; she was not one, however, who sold her love for money in the ordinary market, but in the field of freedom it was given as a reward for the love of country. We will soon show further on how a delightful smile from her beautiful face encouraged fighting heroes and how a slight frown from her dark eyebrows hastily sent back to the field cowards who had come away.²²

Thus far historical discussion of the role of bazaar women at Meerut stemmed from Wilson's 1858 reference to the "frail ones". In 1927 some new information would emerge that raised troubling questions (for the British) about the identity of one of those

²² V.D. Savarkar, *op. cit.*, pp. 186–87; for the follow-up reference to Azizan, see 197. Azizan, or "Azeezun" as she was often called, is well attested in the historical record, though whether she traded sex in exchange for patriotic service is not known. As we shall see below, she was a more complicated figure than Savarkar allows.

women.²³ Significantly, Mutiny historiography was winding down by this time. Indeed, new scholarship was appearing, in part influenced by the rising nationalist critique of imperialism on moral grounds—scholarship that even called into question the behaviour of the British in 1857.²⁴ The new information that emerged in 1927, about a mysterious woman named “Mees Dolly”, may in retrospect be seen to have reflected and perhaps even fed into the doubts about empire that were gaining momentum in this period, even if its author, Sir George MacMunn, himself seemed to possess no qualms about the blessings of British rule. MacMunn had served many years in the British Indian military, had written numerous essays and books on matters military and historical, and perhaps was best known as the author of the martial race theory in Indian army circles. Thus he was well versed in the nineteenth-century primary source material. What had drawn MacMunn’s attention and would eventually lead to his discovery of “Mees Dolly” was a stray reference in an 1857 letter from W. Henry Norman, who had served as Adjutant General of the force that besieged Delhi. “By the way”, Norman wrote to his wife in August of that year, “I must mention that a European woman was hung [sic] at Meerut, being implicated in the arrangements for the first outbreak”.²⁵ According to MacMunn, Norman possessed a spotless reputation as a man of supreme judgment, as someone unlikely to write anything that was not an unimpeachable fact, especially “to that anxious gathering of women and wounded in the hills, already agog with every piece of ill-considered gossip”. Yet, MacMunn observed, “never in any story or in any history has any hint of

²³ MacMunn, op. cit., pp. 327–31. This and the following two paragraphs are drawn from this source.

²⁴ The best known of these by English writers were Edward Thompson, *The Other Side of the Medal*, London: Hogarth Press, 1925, and F. W. Buckler’s 1922 essay, “The Political Theory of the Indian Mutiny”, republished in M.N. Pearson, ed., *Legitimacy and Symbols: The South Asian Writings of F. W. Buckler*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985.

²⁵ This passage occurs in *The Memoirs of Field Marshall Sir Henry Wylie Norman*, ed. & arr. Sir William Lee-Warner, London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1908, p. 68.

such a supreme tragedy”—namely, the hanging of a European woman for involvement in the Mutiny—“ever been given”. The mystery had, he wrote, “always intrigued me greatly”, not least because no one else seemed to have noticed the passage. Even two of Norman’s sons, whom MacMunn knew well, knew nothing about it—though they, like MacMunn, insisted that Norman “would never have mentioned it if it had not been true”. MacMunn “hunted high and low, in highways and byways, for any record or dispatch or memoir or anything in the summaries of events in the Meerut district or what was then the North-West Provinces”. To no avail: “the history [was] silent, completely silent”.

MacMunn originally had noticed the Norman reference in about 1912 or 1913. In 1920 he became the Grand Master of the Freemasons in the Punjab, a position that afforded him frequent opportunity to travel to various “stations” and interact with “many of what are known as the domiciled community of India”—some “pure European, whether born in India or in the United Kingdom, others are of mixed descent”. For someone upon whom “the romance of the Great Sepoy Mutiny has always had the deepest hold”, this new position afforded him an exciting new avenue of research. At one such Masonic meeting, MacMunn was directed to “a Mutiny man”—as veterans of the conflict were known—and engaging the old codger in conversation, he soon learned that not only had he been at Meerut, he had served as a trumpeter in the storied volunteer force known as the “Khaki Risallah”. MacMunn’s pulse quickened; the Khaki Risallah had fought far and wide in the Meerut district, putting down the rebellion. He asked the old man whether he had ever heard of “any European woman joining the mutineers, or having anything to do with them”. After stroking his long beard and sipping some whisky, the aged one hesitantly recalled that a couple of Eurasian women had been carried off, though he did not remember that they had actually joined the rebel cause. Then a glimmer of recollection lit his eye: “Wait now, sir, while I think... I wonder if you are speaking of Miss Dolly—‘Mees’ Dolly, as I’ve heard them natives call her.”



MacMunn eventually concluded that the details that emerged from his interview with the old veteran were “probably the foundation of Captain Norman’s letter”.²⁶ He began with the context, “In most Bazaars attached to large cantonments now and again some unfortunate European or Eurasian women have at one time or another established themselves. In these days no English woman would be allowed to remain in such a position, though to this day at times some of mixed parentage may be found.” MacMunn then referred the reader to that “wonderful book of the Indian Mutiny” in which “Mrs. Steele [sic] has told the story, well known at the time, of how the courtesans in the Bazaar had started the outbreak at Meerut, by jeering at the men of the Light Cavalry...” As noted, MacMunn preferred Steele’s to all the other Mutiny novels that had appeared in the previous half century. “But,” he noted, “even Mrs. Steele has not told of ‘Mees’ Dolly.” MacMunn continued:

It seemed that a European woman lived in the Saddar Bazaar at Meerut, and Maginnis [not the old veteran’s real name²⁷] thought that she was pure white, ‘but country-born, like

²⁶ For a skeptical reading, see Wagner, *The Great Fear of 1857*, London: Peter Lang, 2010, pp. 133, 276–77n16, who writes that “[a]ppealing as the story may be, it is completely unsubstantiated”. While it is true that no other sources on Mees Dolly have appeared, and that it is hard to know what to make of MacMunn’s tale, I take a more agnostic position. There were numerous cases of British “regimental women”, that is, officially sanctioned wives of men in the Queen’s regiments, who fell afoul of regulations for dabbling in the illicit sale of native liquor; some of these drifted to the bazaar to set up houses of refreshment-cum-brothels. See, e.g., the case of Sarah Duff of Dinapore, in nos. 22–23 of 16 May 1851, Military Consultations, National Archives of India, New Delhi. Duff, the wife of a private in HM’s 80th Foot, “had established herself in the Bazar where she became such a nuisance that the Cant. Magistrate on application removed her from its limits. She has however fixed her residence in one of the many Bazars in the vicinity of this Regt and her house is the resort of all the worthless characters in it”. The remainder of the consultation file makes clear that this was not an isolated problem.

²⁷ MacMunn called him “old Tom Maginnis”, but indicated in a footnote (329n1) that this was not his real name; presumably he changed it for the essay, to protect the veteran’s privacy. “Maginnis” allegedly told MacMunn that when the uprising occurred, he had been a “Trumpeter in the Bengal Horse

myself, sir.' Rumour had it that she was the widow of a sergeant, and had been in trouble for theft, and had eventually drifted to the Bazaar. A fortnight after the outbreak at Meerut, just after the troops had marched against Delhi under Brigadier Wilson, the Khaki Risallah scouring the country had found a European woman about to drive away from a small bungalow, apparently derelict, in the Stud Farm at Hapur. She was, he remembered, brought in under escort, and he had heard, he thought, that she was wanted for egging on the mutineers and helping at the murder of two Eurasian girls who also lived in the Bazaar. '...I soon went on to Delhi, sir, and I think I remember hearing she was popped [executed]'

MacMunn acknowledged that by the end of their interview, "Maginnis was really pretty hazy, and I found after a bit that he was prepared to agree to any suggestion that I made to help the story out". Still, MacMunn was convinced of the truth of the tale and was fairly certain it substantiated Norman's letter to his wife. Piecing together bits and pieces of "stories that I had heard elsewhere", MacMunn surmised that Mees Dolly had "drifted to the Bazaar after some lawless life of adventure, following possibly on a conviction for theft..., and kept a house of refreshment of sorts". Eventually, "no doubt enraged by the cold shoulder shown to her on all sides", she "had turned sour, and was found on the side of the mutineers"—like so many others "[r]ight through history" who "go sour against their own folk". His final lines summed up, for him, the moral of the story: "surely

Artillery Depot at Meerut". A few days after 10th May, he "was sent to the Khaki Risallah as a trumpeter". According to Appendix I of G. W. Williams, "Narrative of Events Connected with the Outbreak in 1857", Allahabad: Government Press, 1858, there were a total of six trumpeters in the Risallah who had been attached to two Bengal horse regiments at Meerut (the 3rd Light Cavalry and the 4th Lancers). Of these, five were Europeans, and of these five, two were named McKinlay—one from each regiment. There is no mention of "Mees Dolly" or anyone remotely resembling her being captured at the stud farm at Hapur in either Williams' narrative or in Robert Henry Wallace Dunlop, *Service and Adventure with the Khakee Rissallah; or Meerut Volunteer Horse, During the Mutinies of 1857–58*, London: Richard Bentley, 1858.



no tragedy of a waste product was ever greater. *Sunt lacrymae rerum*”.²⁸

Possibly one reason MacMunn was drawn toward a tragic rendering of the “Mees Dolly” story is that, by the time he was writing, “no English woman would be allowed to remain in such a position”. Whether or not this was true (and the work of Ashwini Tambe on European prostitution in late colonial Bombay suggests some flexibility on race policing, at least on the part of the authorities in that city²⁹), there is no question but that matters of race loomed large for MacMunn. It is easier to explain why he avoided telling the story of Mees Dolly as a tale of imperial irony: he did not subscribe to the theory (*pace* Wilson) that the uprising was the result of a premeditated conspiracy that had run off the rails due to a premature eruption of violence. Indeed, he did not mention Wilson at all in his 1927 essay. In a later work he would write that “The less responsible accounts of the Mutiny have talked of plots and plans, but the careful enquiries made afterwards quite failed to produce any evidence of such.”³⁰ If no simultaneous strike had been planned, there would be no reason to think that a premature eruption at Meerut somehow doomed the prospects for success. Irony was therefore, for MacMunn, an inappropriate register for narrating the tale of Mees Dolly.

The task of harnessing “Mees Dolly” to irony would fall to the journalist and amateur Mutiny historian P. J. O. Taylor, writing in the late 1980s and 1990s (see below). Oddly, by this time, the role of the bazaar women at Meerut had receded somewhat in

²⁸ There are tears for misfortune.

²⁹ Ashwini Tambe, *Codes of Misconduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

³⁰ Sir George MacMunn, *The Indian Mutiny in Perspective*, London: G. Bell & Sons, 1931, p. 39. He adds here: “The story that some men of the 3rd Cavalry had been taunted by the courtezans of the bazaar is true.” Curiously, he later writes (p. 185) that “There is a strange allusion in Norman’s letters from Delhi to one of the Directors of the East India Company, of a European woman ‘hung at Meerut for her share in the Mutiny there’ to which no clue is available.” Perhaps he’d come to distrust the story of “Mees Dolly”?

historical reconstructions. For example, two influential (and competing) surveys written to mark the centenary of the rebellion—by S.N. Sen and R. C. Majumdar—both failed to mention the role of women in Meerut. Sen felt Wilson’s theory of Meerut as a premature eruption lacked any basis in evidence; so this may have prompted him to set aside that portion of the 1858 report altogether. Majumdar disputed the conspiracy theory outright (and even attacked Sen for giving it some qualified support), and while he quoted the portion of the Wilson report that spelled out his views on the matter, he did not include the nearby paragraph about the “frail ones of the Meerut bazaar”.³¹

A third major work on 1857 appeared in this centenary year in the form of a multi-volume compilation of documents entitled *Freedom Movement in Uttar Pradesh*. Included in the compilation are Wilson’s paragraphs about the “frail ones of the Meerut bazaar” and his premature eruption theory. The editor, S. A.A. Rizvi, expressed in a footnote his opinion that Sen’s dismissal of the Wilson conspiracy theory was unwarranted. More importantly, Rizvi also included a translation of the Dehlavi account (see footnote 5, above, for his translation). The timing may have been important: Dehlavi’s narrative had recently become widely available in published form from Lahore in 1955.³² Unfortunately, because Rizvi’s work was a collection of primary

³¹ Surendra Nath Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, Calcutta: Government of India, 1957, pp. 59–65 for the Meerut uprising, p. 402 for his dismissal of Wilson’s conspiracy theory; and R.C. Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny and Revolt of 1857*, Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay 1957, pp. 76–81 for Meerut and p. 371 on Wilson. A British centenary volume was authored by Major-General Richard Hilton, entitled *The Indian Mutiny: A Centenary History*, London: Hollis & Carter, 1957; see pp. 43–47 for Meerut. However it was a meager affair based on a relatively small selection of major secondary works.

³² Rizvi (ed.), *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh*, vol. 1, p. 402. Dehlavi’s account of the speech of the mutineers to the emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar is on p. 406. Rizvi made no comment regarding the possibility that Dehlavi was the source for Wilson. In fact, the two accounts were separated in sequence by the testimony of a different bazaar woman, Golab Jaun, whom I discuss below; as well as an extract of another version of the premature eruption theory, by M.R. Gubbins, *The Mutinies in Oudh*, p. 100.



source documents and was intended more for professional historians, it did not have the popular impact of Majumdar and Sen's narratives.

The women of the Meerut bazaar reappear in the 1857 historical narrative, albeit in muted form, in what is often regarded as the most accessible treatment of 1857 written in the twentieth century, Christopher Hibbert's 1978 classic, *The Great Mutiny: India 1857*. Hibbert took a novel approach to the bazaar women, however. Instead of following the script laid down by Wilson, Kaye, Steel, and Savarkar, he described the women's taunts in such a way as to undercut their agency in sparking the uprising:

Several officers of this regiment [the 20th] had been sitting quietly talking in their Commanding Officer's bungalow when they had been called down to the men's lines where about seventy badmashes from the bazaar were clamouring outside the regimental magazine. Some sepoy, it was said, had assured the prostitutes in the bazaar—who were taunting them with their failure to rescue their imprisoned comrades—that they need not worry, for the native troops were going to mutiny that very evening; and a rumor had since got about that the European soldiers had been ordered to disarm all the native regiments. By the time the officers arrived in the lines both the sepoy and the rabble of the bazaar appeared dangerously close to violence.³³

Hibbert's account departs considerably from either Dehlavi's or Wilson's, so much so that it would appear to be based on a possible third source. Unfortunately, a scouring of the possible sources fails to satisfy. The three sources that Hibbert relied upon for this section of text are a memoir by Sir Hugh Gough entitled *Old Memories*, a section of N. A. Chick's *Annals of the Indian Rebellion*, and letters of Roland Richardson of Kirkland held in the National Library of Scotland. None of these provide support for the claim that the sepoy of the 20th had reassured the

³³ Christopher Hibbert, *The Great Mutiny: India 1857*, New York: Penguin, 1978, p. 82.

prostitutes of the bazaar that they were in fact going to rise up on that very afternoon–evening, on the 10th May.³⁴ In fact, they don't mention the women of the bazaar at all.

The phenomenal success of Hibbert's volume reflected a renewed interest in the history of the British Raj in India, particularly during moments of empire *in extremis*—a postcolonial nostalgia that some critics derided as “the rage for the Raj”.³⁵ Richard Attenborough's ‘Gandhi’ would appear in cinemas in 1982; David Lean's filmic interpretation of E. M. Forster's *Passage to India* soon followed; Paul Scott's *Jewel in the Crown* likewise attracted large British and American audiences. The “rage for the Raj” was not restricted to Western audiences however: P.J.O. Taylor began a popular column for the *Statesman* newspaper (simultaneously published in Delhi and Calcutta) in the late 1980s offering nuggets from the British Indian past; and one of his first (and easily the most popular) contributions on the subject of 1857 was about “Mees Dolly”.

Whereas MacMunn was gripped by the tragic quality of the Mees Dolly story, Taylor presented it as a supremely ironic misadventure, so much so that it teetered on the edge of a Monty-Pythesque imperial farce. Taylor did this by making recourse to Wilson's theory of premature eruption brought on by “the spark which fell from female lips”, the lips of the “frail ones of the Meerut bazaar”. Thus in Taylor's reading “Mees Dolly”—a “fallen” British woman scorned by her own race—condemned the

³⁴ Hibbert adopted a loose citation style as he was writing for a popular audience. Though the passage occurs on p. 82, the only possible note that conceivably refers to it is note 27 on p. 83; the brief endnote text is on p. 405. Chick's *Annals* is a compilation of sources; the text in Chick cited by Hibbert is from W. H. Carey, *The Mahomedan Rebellion*, pp. 41–43. It is also included in Rizvi (ed.), *FSUP*, vol. VI, pp. 26–28. The full reference for Gough is Sir Hugh Gough, *Old Memories*, Edinburgh: W. Blackwood & Sons, 1897. I am grateful to Dr. Maria Castrillo, Curator of Manuscripts and Archives at the National Library of Scotland, for her assistance with the “Richardson of Kirkland” letters.

³⁵ Anita Desai, “The Rage for the Raj,” *The New Republic* (25 November 1985): p. 26. Desai's essay focuses on Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet*.

British Empire but saved it in the process, all in the same breath. He concluded his piece thus:

She was well-known in the bazar: I cannot prove it—and nobody will ever be able to do so now—but it might well have been her house that the troopers frequented: it is fascinating to think that it might have been from her lips that the fateful taunts came! ... What if the ‘female lips’ were those of Mees Dolly? Then she may be said to have saved, quite inadvertently, the British Raj in India: with hindsight perhaps the authorities might not have hanged her!³⁶

There is more to Taylor than meets the eye. MacMunn is obviously the source for Taylor’s piece, even to the point of adopting his phrasing—e.g., his reference to Mees Dolly having “turned sour”. Yet Taylor fails to credit him as the source or mention him at all. And it turns out that MacMunn was not the only author that Taylor drew upon in his essay. He also appropriated large chunks of Steel’s chapter on Meerut (see above), likewise without mentioning her, and passed it off as dialogue from the historical record. This included Steel’s wording for the taunts flung at the soldiers, the soldiers’ own frenzied exclamations in response, and even Steel’s wry comment on Mutiny historiography. Here is Taylor:

‘We have no kisses for cowards!’ was the cry. Were they really men, they were asked, to allow their comrades to be fitted with anklets of iron and led off to prison? And for what? Because they would not swerve from their creed! Go

³⁶ P.J.O. Taylor, *A Companion to the ‘Indian Mutiny’ of 1857*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 217–218. Similar versions appear in P.J.O. Taylor, *A Star Shall Fall: India 1857*, New Delhi: Indus, 1993, pp. 234–237; *Chronicles of the Mutiny and Other Historical Sketches*, New Delhi: Indus, 1992, pp. 21–24; and, before that, in Taylor’s column for *The Statesman*, New Delhi, 6 October 1989. The only reference to any sources on Mees Dolly in Taylor’s account is a cryptic aside that “if I ever get to visit a certain Regimental Museum, who knows, I might find her real name”. There is no mention of MacMunn who is clearly Taylor’s main source. I am grateful to Clare Anderson for bringing Taylor’s account of “Mees Dolly” to my attention in 2007.



and rescue them, they were told, before coming to us for kisses. Who was the first to break under the jeers? We shall never know his name. But suddenly the cry went up: 'To horse! To horse, brothers! To the gaol, to our comrades!' And the Great 'Mutiny' had begun. No consideration of caste, or religion or patriotism. ...just a taunt from a pair of painted lips!

It will be recalled that Steel had introduced her novel by noting that she had tried to write both a story and a history, but that it was up to her readers to decide whether she had succeeded in either. Apparently, at least if Taylor is any judge, she had succeeded only too well. Taylor had turned her invented dialogue into the stuff of history. Purists may object that Taylor was merely a journalist and Mutiny buff, an amateur historian at best. Be that as it may, two recent histories of 1857 have deployed Taylor's ventriloquism of Steel (and of course MacMunn) in their own reconstruction of events at Meerut. Indeed, Jane Robinson (*Angels of Albion: Women of the Indian Mutiny*) and Saul David (*The Indian Mutiny: 1857*) not only adopt Taylor's close paraphrasing of Steel as historically factual, they unequivocally identify Mees Dolly as the main prostitute of the bazaar who ("with her sisters", in Robinson's case) rebuffs the advances of the disconsolate men of the 3rd Light Cavalry with the retort, "we have no kisses for cowards!"³⁷

Was "Mees Dolly" too good—or, to paraphrase Mae West, too bad—to be true? More generally, did the courtesans or prostitutes of the Meerut bazaar really spark off the single greatest armed challenge to the British empire in the nineteenth century?

³⁷ Jane Robinson, *Angels of Albion: Women of the Indian Mutiny*, London: Viking, 1996, pp. 30, 32; and Saul David, *The Indian Mutiny: 1857*, London: Viking, 2002, p. 84. To her credit, Robinson also cites MacMunn; but given the way she attributes Steel's script to Mees Dolly, it is clear that her main source is Taylor (the version she cites is *Chronicles of the Mutiny and other Sketches*, 24). David simply cites Robinson, *Angels of Albion*, pp. 30 and 32.



More generally still, were the fateful women of the Meerut bazaar courtesans and prostitutes at all, or were they (as Dehlavi seems to suggest) more in the way of wives?

I return to these questions momentarily. What the foregoing suggests, however, is that the image of the anti-imperial bazaar prostitute captured the imagination of numerous writers during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And not just writers. It is difficult to imagine a more colourful confirmation of the spirited 1857 prostitute than the character “Heera” portrayed by Rani Mukherjee in the 2005 Ketan Mehta film, “The Rising: The Ballad of Mangal Pandey”.³⁸ Colourful, but also disappointing. True to Bollywood form, there is much in the way of historical distortion: while “Heera” clearly feels nothing but contempt for her British clients, she and her fellow “nautch girls” are not portrayed in the role of revolutionary spine stiffeners. Rather she ends up serving as one of the two dewy-eyed supporting actors who are torn by their transgressive love for Aamir Khan’s nobly savage Mangal Pandey—the other being Captain Gordon, played by Toby Stephens.³⁹

What to make of this? The English-language *reading* public—in India and Britain—seems to have long been captivated by the prospect of the British Empire brought to its knees and inadvertently saved by “fallen women”, even (or especially) when it was revealed that one of those fallen women may have been British. Whether the register was irony, romance, tragedy, or farce, there seems to have been something deeply satisfying about

³⁸ Ketan Mehta, “The Rising: The Ballad of Mangal Pandey” (2005).

³⁹ Gordon’s bromantic attentions are eventually distracted by the appearance of a soon-to-be immolated widow (or *sati*), thus completing the gender stereotypes. Mangal Pandey was stationed at Barrackpore and his single-handed mutiny and subsequent execution on 8th April, while indisputably real, did not open the flood gates of rebellion across northern India—Amitabh Bachhan’s concluding narration notwithstanding. For a wide-ranging and insightful discussion of the historiographical implications of “The Rising”, see Dipesh Chakrabarty and Rochona Majumdar, “Film and History”, *Economic and Political Weekly* (May 12-18, 2007): esp. p. 1774.

locating causative agency with lowly bazaar women. For some, the tale seems to have functioned at a mythic level as a kind of providential redemption of the imperial project, as though ‘woman had stood forth to test British resolve in a trial by fire’ and, in preordaining Britain’s triumph, thereby forgive Britons of their myriad sins. But for Bollywood audiences, it would appear that a drama in which women are agents is largely out of bounds, especially when it comes to such a sensitive historical topic as 1857.

Depositions

In the wake of the uprising, indeed even as its final embers were being extinguished, the Commissioner of Military Police for the North Western Provinces, G.W. Williams, was deputed to investigate the violence at Meerut and Kanpur (Cawnpore). The principal object of his investigations at Meerut was to confirm or refute reports that the recently established police constabulary had taken a lead in the killing spree that followed the revolt by the 3rd Light Cavalry and the 20th Native Infantry. Williams also sought to determine whether and to what degree the uprising there was the result of a premeditated conspiracy. As regards the former question, there could be no doubt: not only were most of the police clearly guilty of “culpable negligence, and willful disregard of their first duty as policemen, i.e. to afford every assistance in quelling the disturbance, and saving life and property”, but Williams also noted that “Europeans were murdered in the Sudder Bazar, in many instances, in close proximity to Police Stations”, and that “others were assaulted by men in the police uniform”. Even the Officiating Kotwal, who “on one occasion...succeeded in dispersing a band of plunderers”, himself “subsequently prevented any seizures being made, either of persons or property, fearing the personal revenge of the mob”. He also apparently went out of his way to protect “his own fraternity, the Goojurs”.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ G.W. Williams, “Memorandum on the Mutiny and Outbreak at Meerut, in May 1857”, Allahabad: Government Press, 1858, pp. 1 and 4.

As to the question of premeditation and conspiracy, Williams expressed guarded skepticism. He acknowledged that there was plenty of evidence regarding a growing sense of ill-feeling amongst the soldiery concerning their religion, that the cantonment and bazaar were rife with rumour, and that there was even some early information circulating on the day of the outbreak that an uprising was afoot. Nonetheless he noted that statements about the prior existence of ominous signs and later allegations of conspiracy all “vanished ghostlike into thin air” when investigated. At the end of his memorandum, Williams threw down a gauntlet: “Those therefore who have received any information regarding such a conspiracy should undoubtedly come forward and have the same attested, both for the punishment of the guilty, and for the security of the public hereafter.” For good measure, he added:

If any such plot throughout the Native Army existed, the Meerut troops were indeed rash and insane to mar the whole, simply that they might hasten the release of their companions, which a short time subsequently could have been effected with far greater chances of success, less risk to themselves, and with infinitely grander results to the cause they had at heart. Granting the existence of such a conspiracy, how can we account for such mad rashness on the part of these conspirators?⁴¹

Williams submitted his report from Allahabad on 15 November 1858. Wilson would submit his report nearly six weeks later, on 24 December, from Calcutta. Significantly, Wilson would introduce his report with his theory of premeditated conspiracy and the premature eruption at Meerut.

Were Williams and Wilson engaged in a kind of proxy debate on the question of conspiracy and premature eruption? This seems certain in retrospect, though neither mentions the other’s name

⁴¹ Williams, *ibid.*, p. 12.

in their respective reports. “How can we account for such mad rashness on the part of these [hypothetical] conspirators?” Williams asked. Wilson’s response, of course, was that the manly pride of the men of the 3rd Light Cavalry and 20th Native Infantry had been called into question by the only group that could have done so with any serious effect, who truly understood the ins and outs of manhood, namely, the “frail ones of the Meerut bazaar”. Indeed, Williams seems to have tried to anticipate this argument, suggesting that he may have had some prior intimation of Wilson’s theories: in his summary narrative of the outbreak at Meerut, Williams noted that he had “also been informed that the men were taunted by the disreputable inhabitants of the Sudder Bazar for allowing their brethren to suffer on account of their religion, and the cry of *deen, deen*, was even thus early raised”. But in the very next sentence Williams made clear that he had doubts about the truth of the story (see the italicized portion of the quoted passage below). That he did not refer specifically to bazaar *women* is noteworthy. The reason for this may have been that he possessed markedly different evidence regarding the women of the bazaar, in the form of a young woman named Sophie. He alluded to it in that same next sentence:

However, *whether the foregoing be true or not*, the decision of an appeal to arms, most probably was arrived at on Saturday or Sunday; as the depositions prove that the Cashmerian Girl, Sophie, received an intimation of the coming outbreak from a sepoy, at about 2 p.m. on the day of the revolt, which passed on to the mother of Mussumat Golab Jaun; it, through the latter, reached the ears of the late Dr. Smith; but he, as many others would have done, treated it merely as an idle bazar report, such as prevailed even before sentence was passed on the Sowars....⁴²

Not unlike debates over the legal status of *sati* in the early nineteenth century, Williams and Wilson seemed to be relying on women to score points in a debate over whether 1857 was a premeditated conspiracy gone awry. No doubt this seemed like a

⁴² Williams, *ibid.*, pp. 5–6. Emphasis added.

matter of great import at the time. By the late twentieth century, by contrast, the issue had taken on the quality of spectacle. For historians in the early twenty-first century, the outcome of this debate matters not at all. However, the details of the evidence adduced on both sides should concern us: not only do those details bring us closer to historical actors who have for too long been neglected, but bazaar women and the way cantonment men interacted with them offer clues to understanding the way that gender and sexuality and emotion and manliness structured the hybrid space of the cantonment and sustained military power and British rule in India. We have received some glimpses of this, albeit through a glass darkly, with respect to the bazaar women originally invoked in the narratives of Dehlavi and Wilson—and in the literarily inflected derivations thereof by Wilson’s many successors. Now it is time to let Sophie and her fellow “Cashmerians” have their say.

Williams recorded seventy-one depositions at Meerut. He was deputed to the task “at the close of 1857” and he submitted his report in mid-November 1858. We may presume his first order of business was identifying his witnesses and taking their statements, and that that this occurred in the first four or five months of 1858. He would have then spent the summer months, possibly in one of the hill stations, studying the testimonies, cross-checking facts, and communicating with subordinates in Meerut to gather additional evidence to clarify unresolved issues. October would have been set aside for drafting his introductory memorandum and organizing his evidence. Witnesses included sepoy, residents of the bazaar and town, merchants, clerks, servants, labourers, policemen, civilian employees, etc.

The depositions of the Cashmerian women begin with that of “Mussumut Golab Jaun,” no. 32. This is followed by no. 33, the deposition of “Mussumat Zeenut,” and no. 34, “Mussumut Sophie”. Deposition no. 35 was a brief follow up report by the officiating kotwal who checked on statements made by Sophie. They are given here in their entirety:

No. 32. *Deposition of Mussumut Golab Jaun, Cashmerian, residing in the Sudder Bazar:* At the time of the out-break, I was residing with the late Dr. Smith; was on that day in his house, and informed him of the intended out-break, of which, I heard from my mother; she learnt it from a Cashmerian girl, named Sophie, who was told by a sepoy, at about 2 p.m. on that day, that the troops would mutiny and massacre the Europeans. Dr. Smith replied, I always brought him bazar reports void of foundation, and took no notice of it.

I therefore quietly sat down, at about 5 or 6 p.m., sound of musketry was heard from the infantry lines, and all at once, I saw hundreds of men running towards the parade, after a while people began to rush into the bungalow. I begged my master to fly, but he refused, asking where we could go to; and we then stood by the garden hedge; meanwhile, my mother sent a dooly [covered sedan chair] for me from the sudder bazar, in which I left, my master remaining behind, the mob had not then entered the compound though crowds surrounded it. As I passed, they wished to kill me, but hearing I was a woman, allowed me to pass. The girl Sophie was turned out of the bazar, and her house knocked down.

No. 33. *Deposition of Mussumat Zeenut, Cashmerian, residing in the Sudder Bazar:* On the day of the out-break, I was residing in the sudder bazar. About 2 p.m. on that day, I heard from Mussumat Mehonee, mother of Sophie, that there was to be a disturbance that day, and that she had heard it from the sepoys, I did not believe it, still mentioned it to my daughter Golab Jaun. At 6 p.m., when I heard firing, I sent a dooly for her, I can give no information of the disturbance in the sudder bazar, I do not know where the Cashmerian girl Sophie is.

No. 34. *Deposition of Mussumat Sophie, Cashmerian, residing in the City of Meerut:* At the time of the out-break, the date of which I do not remember, I was residing in the sudder bazar, on the day it occurred no one was in my house, but Goolam Hossain, my servant. At 4 o'clock, Pundit Dhurm Narain, who was formerly in the office of the Meerut cantonment joint magistrate, came to my house, but left,

when the out-break commenced, to return home. I then closed the doors; my mother is named Mehree, she left for Loodhiana, some two months before the out-break. I reported her departure at the cotwalie, I never heard of the out-break before it commenced. The sowars and sepoy did not frequent my house.

No. 35. *Report of Bukhtawur Singh, officiating Cotwal of the Sudder Bazar, Meerut:* Agreeably to orders received, I made enquiries of the neighbours of Mussumat Sophie, and learned that sowars were in the habit of visiting the house, and that her mother had left previous to the out-break; her house, with others in that neighbourhood, was razed to the ground.⁴³

There is much of interest in these statements. For instance, the relationship between bazaar women and the civil authorities, the military, and the medical profession (Dr. Smith was, Williams informs us elsewhere, a surgeon on the “veteran’s establishment”); the role of bazaar women and the circulation of information; the relationship between the bazaar and the cantonment as hybrid space; bazaar women and respectability (“Mussumat” is equivalent to “Miss” and suggests that these women were not simply “common prostitutes”, a term with its own particular logic; Sophie had a servant, and Zeenut had the wherewithal to send a *dooly* for her daughter); daughters and their mothers; and, of course, the significance of the term *Cashmerian*.

Let us first begin with Williams and how he read these depositions. The first and most basic conclusion that he drew from the statements by Golab Jaun and her mother Zeenut was that Sophie had been told by a sepoy at 2 p.m. that an outbreak of violence was imminent. Sophie, interestingly, denied this—and she also denied that her mother had passed on such information to Zeenut: her mother, she claimed (correctly, according to the follow up report by Bukhtawur Singh), had long

⁴³ “Depositions Taken at Meerut, by Major G. W. Williams, Superintendent of Police, N.W.P.”, Allahabad: Government Press, 1858, pp. 23–24.

since left for Ludhiana (and, she added—to further impeach Zeenut’s report—“my mother is named Mehree”). For Williams, the fact that Sophie only learned of the impending violence at 2 in the afternoon constituted evidence that there was no premeditated conspiracy; rather, a sepoy or *sowar* close to Sophie had merely shared the information with her—perhaps so she could pass it along, to warn others (including especially the British), or perhaps he told her to impress her (is this where Hibbert got the idea that the soldiers were reassuring the prostitutes on Sunday that a revolt was planned?).

More broadly, there is no mention in the depositions gathered by Williams of any taunting of the soldiery by the women of the bazaar. If anything, bazaar women—Cashmerians according to the depositions, whose line of work Williams left unstated—were warning each other and, in Golab Jaun’s case, her “master” (Dr. Smith) that violence was coming. What, then, provoked the soldiers to suddenly rise up? Williams points to a rumor that was circulating after the ironing parade on the 9th May, that the two regiments were about to be disarmed in their entirety “and that sets of irons [that is, iron shackles for wrists and ankles] sufficient to confine the whole force” were “in course of preparation”.⁴⁴ Two separate depositions spoke directly to this issue.⁴⁵ The first was by Kooman Singh, who had been a Havildar in the 3rd Light Cavalry, who stated that “[a] rumor spread to the effect that 2,000 sets of irons, were ordered to be prepared in two nights and a day, for the rest of the men”. Rundheer Sing, trooper of the 3rd Light Cavalry, gives slightly more detail:

Q. Do you know whether the mutiny was preconcerted?

A. No, the men objected to the cartridges, two naiks, Koodrut Ali, and Peer Ali, persuaded the men to take an oath

⁴⁴ Williams, “Memorandum”, p. 6.

⁴⁵ “Depositions Taken at Meerut” (No. 12. *Deposition of Kooman Singh, late Havildar in the 3rd Irregular Cavalry, now Wordee Major in the Mounted Police*, and No. 13. *Deposition of Rundheer Sing, Trooper, of the 3rd Light Cavalry, now with the Mounted Police, at Meerut*).



to refuse them, till every regiment had consented to use them. After the 85 were sent to jail, *a report circulated, that two thousand sets of irons were being prepared for those who might still persist in refusing them.*

Q. Where did you first hear this report?

A. I cannot tell; it was spread abroad every where.

Q. Was the mutiny planned for the 10th May?

A. No, nothing of the kind.

The image, then, of a markedly different kind of bracelets and anklets for men, was in the air in the afternoon and evening of May 9th. Given this fact, it is reasonable to presume some connection between this fact and the bracelet/anklet imagery employed in the gender inversion taunts recorded in the accounts by Dehlavi and Wilson. However, it would be a mistake to simply conclude that the rumour about 2,000 shackles somehow evolved over time into a story about the men being taunted by the women in terms that employed gender inversion and the bracelet imagery. It seems equally plausible to conclude that the shackling rumour prompted snide remarks and even taunts on the evening of the 9th May, and that the women of the bazaar may have taken a part or even the lead in this.⁴⁶ It is worth noting in this context that the bracelet imagery is fairly common as a form of gendered ridicule in Bhojpuri, a regional language of eastern UP and western Bihar that would have been familiar to many of the *sipahis*. Thus a 1971 study of Bhojpuri folk literature includes a song by women who tease men in terms that are strikingly similar to the imagery employed in Dehlavi's account:

If you feel shy then hide in the house,
O husband, not like a man but like a woman.
Wear a sari and bangles and hide your face,
We women would save your honor.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ This is reflected, in fact, in Wilson's phrasing: "*Your brethren have been ornamented with these anklets and incarcerated; and for what?*"

⁴⁷ Shridhar Mishra, *Bhojpuri Lok Sahitya—Sanskritik Adhyayan* [Bhojpuri Folk Literature—A Cultural Examination], Allahabad 1971, p. 158, cited in Pankaj

Thus, while Williams and Wilson stood on opposite sides on the question of conspiracy, they actually were less far apart than they themselves might have thought on the question of the gendered ridicule suffered by the men of the regiments. For Wilson (and Dehlavi), the humiliation of the men occurred at the hands of the women of the bazaar; for Williams, a more general sense of humiliation was in the air, due to the pervasive power of rumour backed by a general apprehension that the impending prospect of being stripped of one's uniform and being shackled with iron bracelets and anklets was more than simple punishment—it was inherently demeaning on gendered grounds. This explains, more so than the extreme heat of the day or the length of time it took to perform the ritual, why “the condemned men made much outcry, taunting their comrades or appealing for rescue”.⁴⁸ It seems the stage was set for a long, painful, and emotional night, whether or not the women of the bazaar themselves felt inspired to taunt the remaining men of the regiments.⁴⁹

Rag, 1857: *The Oral Tradition*, New Delhi: Rupa, 2010, p. 43. The word for “bangles” used here is *churi*. The term for honour is *pagri*, or turban. Bhojpur was, with Awadh, a major recruiting ground for *purbias*, or “easterners,” and became a center of the rebellion, particularly under the leadership of Kuar Singh of Jagdishpur in what was then Shahabad District in southwest Bihar. Despite the 1857 overtures of Rag's work, he does not mention the Meerut episode or the bazaar women. The folk ditty is cited, rather, to contextualize the gender symbolism in many of the songs about 1857, according to which martial prowess and bravery are associated with masculinity. For another song, comparing the Raja of Baundi (who remained loyal to the British) to an “irresponsible young woman”, or *laundi*, see Pankaj Rag, op. cit., p. 167.

⁴⁸ J.A.B. Palmer, op. cit., p. 68. Note that according to this recounting, the prisoners themselves seemed to be taunting or appealing to their fellow soldiers. The exact source for Palmer is unclear, but was probably the Kaye papers in the British Library. Cf. the young J.C.E. Macnabb's letter reproduced in Patrick Caddell, “The Outbreak of the Indian Mutiny”, *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 33, 135 (1955): pp. 118–22, where the men are described as being fairly well behaved during the ironing parade, save for some weeping by brothers, fathers, and sons of the condemned men.

⁴⁹ On the despair and humiliation of the soldiers and the rumours flying around the cantonment and bazaar, see Wagner, *The Great Fear of 1857*, esp. pp. 131–134; Wagner includes in his narrative the taunts of the prostitutes (p.



This brings us back to Sophie and the Cashmerians, since they are the women whose voices have actually survived—shaped, of course, by the seen and unseen pressures of the official police record. Williams does not actually make note of the fact, but there is nothing in their depositions that directly contradicts Wilson and Dehlavi. Let us review the depositions. Williams and his men first questioned Golab Jaun and then Zeenut. Golab Jaun noted, probably in response to what had been a follow-up question by Williams, that Sophie had been “turned out of the bazaar, and her house knocked down”. Apparently Zeenut was also questioned about Sophie’s whereabouts, because after she described sending the dooly for her daughter, she remarked, “I can give no information of the disturbance in the sudder bazaar, I do not know where the Cashmerian girl Sophie is”. When Williams and his men finally tracked Sophie down, she was “residing in the City of Meerut”. Thus she had found a new place, in the main bazaar of the city, a mile or so south-southwest of the cantonment and its bazaar. She provides no information about why she was turned out of the bazaar and her house knocked down, but her answers to Williams’ questions make it clear that she was in no mood to be pegged as a British informant. Contrary to Golab Jaun and Zeenut’s deposition, Sophie claimed she was home alone for most of the day, save for her servant, and that no soldiers visited her. The only visitor she had was one Dhurm Narain, “formerly in the office of the Meerut cantonment joint magistrate”, but he left for home when the outbreak started. In fact, she denied in general that sepoys and sowars visited her house. She denied knowing about the out-break beforehand. She denied that her mother was even in Meerut, let alone passing information to Zeenut. Indeed, she even denied that her mother was named “Mehonee”, which is the name Zeenut had used for her.

133) as well as the shackling rumour (p. 134), but does not connect them. More important for Wagner is the fact that the 10th May was the 15th day of Ramadan. Thus the violence took on the quality of a “sectarian riot” (pp. 143–144)—though Wagner notes (p. 145) also that such clashes “were never just about religion. They were inevitably tied to broader issues concerning access to resources, or commercial and economic competition, or were brought about by the intervention of the colonial state”.

It would appear Sophie felt nervous. We never learn why, according to Golab Jaun, she was turned out of the bazaar. Bukhtawur Singh reported that “her house, with others in that neighbourhood, was razed to the ground”, suggesting that he did not believe (or did not want to give the impression) that she was being singled out by the “bazaar rabble”. But neither did he explicitly state that the mob *did not* turn her out of the bazaar. He did note that, contrary to what Sophie had alleged, “sowars [cavalrymen] *were* in the habit of visiting the house”. (Emphasis added.) On the other hand, Bukhtawur Singh confirmed a different part of Sophie’s evidence, namely, that her mother had left Meerut long before the 10th of May. For her part, Sophie seemed to avoid the issue of whether she had been turned out of the bazaar and her house knocked down—or if she did confirm these facts, they were not included in the deposition.

Sophie’s careful answers to Williams’ questions, particularly in light of what appear to be the more forthcoming statements from Zeenut and Golab Jaun, suggest some dissembling on her part or, at the very least, a firm reluctance to talk. Possibly she felt exposed, that she had suffered enough. If we allow that her house was torn down and that she was turned out of the bazaar (and there would seem no reason for skepticism), then it seems likely that these “facts”—particularly the latter—had something to do with the politics of the mob. Was Sophie being punished for having passed information about the uprising? Could word have gotten around so quickly to this effect? Or perhaps she already had a reputation for being a source of information for the authorities, and the mob decided to take the opportunity of the mayhem on 10th May to punish her for it. This would explain her reluctance to admit to anything during the deposition.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ It is noteworthy that Azizun of Kanpur adopts a similar ambivalent stance and denies everything. In her case, her involvement in the rebellion is very clear. I am grateful to Professor Saumya Gupta of JDM College, Delhi University, for raising this point in my NMML seminar.

Performance

Sophie may have been caught between two worlds in other ways. At first glance, the term “Cashmerian” suggests that Sophie and company were simply Kashmiris. Certainly this is possible. But often in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the term Kashmiri obscured more than it revealed, particularly in reference to “dancing girls”. For whatever reason, but possibly having to do in part with their lighter skin, Kashmiri women were considered highly desirable and were thought to possess a reputation for talent in music, dance, and courtesanship. There is some evidence that female performers styled themselves (or were styled) Kashmiris so as to widen their market appeal. Probably the most famous case of this is Begam Samru of Sardhana, about whom several stories circulated concerning her parentage and place of origin, one version of which was that she was a Kashmiri of Georgian antecedents.⁵¹ That she was early in life being conveyed about the Lahore-Delhi-Agra region as a slave-concubine-nautch-girl seems fairly certain.

Another indication of the appropriation of Kashmiri identity by non-Kashmiris to increase their value comes from early

⁵¹ Thomas Bacon, *First Impressions and Studies from Nature in Hindostan*, vol. II, London: Wm. H. Allen and Co., 1837, 35, who claimed to have witnessed her darbar at Sardhana, wrote that “she was by birth Cashmerian, but by family Georgian. While quite a child, she was the companion of *nauchnies*, for which life she was herself educated...” See Michael Fisher, “Becoming and Making ‘Family’ in Hindustan”, in Indrani Chatterjee (ed.), *Unfamiliar Relations: Family and History in South Asia*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004, pp. 95–98, 116n4–5, for a concise treatment of the various versions. Mahendra Narain Sharma, *The Life and Times of Begam Samru of Sardhana [A.D. 1750–1836]*, Sahibabad: Vibhu Prakashan, 1985, 59, 65n3. Sharma cites Bacon as well as a letter from Bussy to De Castries, 3 March 1874, Pondicherry Records, on her Kashmiri origins. He also reproduces (pp. 192–93) an 1836 letter of intelligence from the Lt. Governor of the N.W. Provinces to the Governor General (no. 66 of 23 May 1836, Foreign Dept Political Consultations, National Archives of India), according to which Begam Samru was “said to have been a dancing girl or prostitute, procured by Company commission and sent from Delhi as a concubine to Walter Reynard [Reinhardt], commonly called Sombre corrupted by the Natives into Sumroo”.

nineteenth-century Calcutta. According to a letter to the *Calcutta Journal* from 1819, signed “AN ARMENIAN”, a “dancing girl” named “Bonnoo Jaun”, who performed to great acclaim during that year’s Durga Puja celebrations and who was described in the local press as a Cashmerian, was in fact the daughter of one “Rutton” and an “English Merchant of Calcutta”, unnamed. As the writer put it, “the above-named Girl is no more a Cashmerian than I am”. He surmised that she had “been found fair enough to be passed off for a Cashmerian!” “Armenian” could not resist adding that “She was on Wednesday last, publicly married for three months only, to a rich Mogul Merchant, who paid One Thousand Rupees in cash, as a Marriage Settlement, besides Two Hundred Rupees to be paid Monthly.”⁵² The salacious tone of the letter aside, one might likewise presume that Golab Jaun had arrived at a not dissimilar arrangement with Dr. Smith of the Meerut veteran’s establishment.

There would seem good reason, therefore, to not take the term Cashmerian at face value but rather treat it as a marker of professional accomplishment or assumed status, that the woman styling herself as such sought to convey the impression that she was a cut above the ordinary run-of-the-mill “nautch girl”, as it were. The letter from the man signing himself as “ARMENIAN” is also significant for the claim that the woman claiming Kashmiri identity was allegedly a product of “mixed” European–Indian birth. By the mid nineteenth century, the terms being used for such persons included “Eurasian”, “East Indian”, and, slightly later “Indo–British”. As David Arnold and C.J. Hawes have persuasively argued, by the 1820s there were alarming numbers of destitute Eurasians swarming the larger stations in Bengal as well as “up the country” in what would become the North Western Provinces. Numbers are hard to come by, but Hawes estimated between two and three thousand children, “many of them Eurasian”, were being cared for in charitable institutions in the three presidency towns and “elsewhere in British India”. But he

⁵² Reproduced in *Selections from Indian Journals*, vol. I: *Calcutta Journal*, comp. Satyajit Das, Calcutta: K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1963, pp. 356–57.

added that

[f]or each Eurasian child who was accommodated there was another should [sic: who?] could not be and who faced an adult life without education of training. In this inadequate provision lies one of the central reasons for the development of a large under-class of Eurasians whose existence was to cause such concern to British authority.⁵³

It seems reasonable to conclude that there were, therefore, thousands of Eurasian children in the major towns and cities with little or no means of regular support. By the 1840s, and despite the creation of orphanages in the 1820s to care for and educate those thousands of Eurasian children who “would now have been wandering around the lanes of the metropolis, in the most wretched and forlorn condition”, the problem of “Eurasian paupers” would get worse. Even women who were, in theory, provided for by the regiments were a source of concern. For example, the authorities complained frequently about the tendency on the part of both native and “half-caste” wives attached to British regiments to turn to “illicit means of support” to make ends meet.⁵⁴ Partly this referred to the sale of illicit “native liquor” in the cantonment, but it seems clear that much anxiety was also expended on the possibility that “regimental women”⁵⁵ were engaging in prostitution.

Regimental women getting into “trouble” returns us to the realm of “Mees Dolly”. Recall the euphemism MacMunn

⁵³ R.C. Hawes, *Poor Relations: The Making of a Eurasian Community in British India 1773–1833*, Richmond: Curzon, 1996, 21–22. See also David Arnold, “Poor Europeans in India, 1750–1947”, *Current Anthropology* 20, 2 (1979): pp. 454–455. More recently, Harald Fischer-Tiné, has examined these questions for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in “White women degrading themselves to the lowest depths: European Networks of Prostitution and Colonial Anxieties in British India and Ceylon, 1880–1914”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 40, 163 (2003): pp. 163–190, and *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Class and White Subalternity in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2009.

⁵⁴ R.C. Hawes, op. cit., pp. 33, 42, 69 (for the latter quote).

⁵⁵ On regimental women, see footnote 27, above.



employed to refer to her line of work, namely, running a “house of refreshment”. As we shall see, this was a common pattern and did not preclude sex work. But there is another reason MacMunn’s “Mees Dolly” tale resonates here, in light of Sophie’s apparent anxieties. Mees Dolly was hanged not simply for “egging on the mutineers”, but also for “helping at the murder of two Eurasian girls who also lived in the Bazaar”.⁵⁶ If Mees Dolly was, in fact, real; and if Sophie was, in fact, a Eurasian styling herself a Cashmerian, then we can begin to perceive an additional reason why Sophie might have preferred to remain quiet during her interrogation by Williams and his men. Losing your house is one thing. Losing your life is another.

Some Conclusions

The war began, as noted at the outset, in Meerut. If Zahir Dehlavi and Cracroft Wilson are to be believed—and there seems to be good reason to believe them—it began in Meerut because the men of the 3rd Light Cavalry and 20th Native Infantry found themselves unable to withstand the emotional force of the taunts being leveled at them by women. This is further evidence that emotions were central to 1857.⁵⁷ But while 1857 may be understood thus, via emotion, as a proto-nationalist expression of a “felt” patriotism couched in terms of *fear*—fear of the loss of caste and religion—the initial, decisive explosion of violence at Meerut had, ironically, little to do with patriotism, caste, and religion. Rather, it had everything to do with gender and humiliation, or rather a fear of humiliation in terms of gender inversion. For some observers, this particular humiliation

⁵⁶ MacMunn, “Mees Dolly”, p. 331. Taylor (“Mees Dolly”, 217) puts it thus: “She was wanted for helping in the murder of two Eurasian girls and, significantly, for ‘egging on the mutineers’. She was hanged.” Taylor left out the detail that the girls “lived in the Bazaar.”

⁵⁷ Rajat Kanta Ray, *The Felt Community: Commonalty and Mentality before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003. This paragraph is a meditation on Ray’s important study of 1857 as well as his reflections in *Exploring Emotional History: Gender, Mentality and Literature in the Indian Awakening*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.



possessed a particular sting because of the identity of those who delivered the taunts. As Flora Anne Steel put it, offering a wry comment on the way historians had sought to explain 1857 over the previous decades:

The word had been spoken. Nothing so very soul-stirring after all. No consideration of caste or religion, patriotism or ambition. Only a taunt from a pair of painted lips.⁵⁸

Whether or not we agree with Steel that “1857”, the event, was the result of a taunt from a pair of painted lips, it seems reasonable to conclude that the uprising at Meerut, without which 1857 (the event) would have unfolded quite differently or perhaps not at all, was the result of the men of the 3rd Light Cavalry and 20th Native Infantry facing the prospect of deep humiliation, a deep humiliation predicated on the question of gender.

Who were these women that they could possess such power over soldiers? Wilson calls them the “frail ones of the Meerut bazaar”—in other words (in the Victorian parlance), “public women”, prostitutes. Dehlavi suggests otherwise, namely, that these were respectable women, “veiled women”—though he doesn’t think much of their intelligence and foresight.⁵⁹ He adds that most of them “were those whose men had been imprisoned”, a turn of phrase that suggests an emotional and perhaps even legal bond between the women and the soldiers. On the surface, then, it would seem difficult to reconcile Wilson and Dehlavi’s accounts on the identity, or “respectability”, of these women—they were either prostitutes or wives. Thus, Rajat Kanta Ray, one of the very few scholars to have made note of both accounts, leaned toward Dehlavi’s testimony to conclude that the women were “not necessarily all courtesans”; he adds the apparently supporting detail that later depositions by the soldiers to Superintendent Williams indicated that the wives and children of at least some of the sepoy and sowars were present in the cantonment at the

⁵⁸ Flora Annie Steel, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

⁵⁹ The term he uses is “masturaat”, veiled or chaste women.

time of the uprising, and that they were left bereft and impoverished in the wake of it.⁶⁰

But the foregoing treatment of Wilson and Dehlavi, and even the commentary by Ray, assumes a stark opposition between sex work and marriage. The reality was and is more complex, with considerable middle ground in between. Here it is useful to examine Dehlavi's phrasing in greater detail: "Especially among a distinct community of veiled women, there have always been some who were foolish and short-sighted." It is an odd turn of phrase, "a distinct community of veiled women".⁶¹ (The following clause, "there have always been some who were foolish and short-sighted", refers to the fact, in Dehlavi's view, that the women did not foresee the consequences of their precipitous taunting of the men.) Was Dehlavi, like Wilson, opting for euphemism in describing a particular class of sex worker? Indeed, the only way to reconcile the two accounts is by concluding that the women being referred to were mistresses or "kept women", or even temporary wives of the soldiers, not unlike Golab Jaun who "was residing with the late Dr. Smith" at the time of the outbreak. Like Dehlavi, Golab Jaun's account merits a second look. She implies that she was of sufficient means and respectability to be sent (by her mother, who was in the *sadr bazaar*) a *dhooly* (*doli*)—a "covered litter" or sedan chair supported by two bamboo poles carried by two or four men—when the mob began to gather menacingly in front of Smith's bungalow. She adds that, "[a]s I passed, they wished to kill me, but hearing I was a woman, allowed me to pass". This implies that the curtains were down, concealing her person from view. She could have been understood, thus, as both a "frail one" (or prostitute) and a "veiled woman."

If this reading is correct, then the differences concerning the status of the women in the accounts by Wilson and Dehlavi are

⁶⁰ Ray, *Felt Community* op. cit., p. 407. Williams took this as evidence that the violence on May 10th was not premeditated. Ray discusses the gender inversion at Meerut in an endnote (p. 505n257): "The offensive imagery of inversion of the role of men and women was a psychological device to incite the former to assert their manhood."

⁶¹ *khasusah farqe masturat mein.*



outweighed by the similarities. Another similarity, thus far not remarked upon, is that both employed ironic euphemisms to characterize the women. Is this a hint that they represented for both authors a kind of category problem, neither here nor there according to the increasingly hard boundaries of *Victoriental* morality? I am inclined to think so. And while Wilson and Dehlavi lacked the words to adequately describe such arrangements, it is evident that a significant number of soldiers kept women in the cantonments, often women to whom they were not bound in marriage or with whom they had formed a temporary arrangement.⁶²

That women played a key role in 1857, an extended event that has been described as “the single most serious armed challenge any Western empire would face, anywhere in the world, in the entire course of the nineteenth century”,⁶³ has long been recognized—or rather, taken for granted. As I have tried to show in the first part of this essay, the brief appearance of women on the stage of history at Meerut became, over the course of the century that followed, a staple of the “Mutiny narrative”. And crucial to the process of turning women into a staple of the Mutiny narrative, I argue, involved rendering them as “prostitutes” or “harlots”. Meerut could thus become a moral tale, a parable—employing either irony (Wilson), romance (Steel, Savarkar), tragedy (MacMunn), or all three combined, as farce (Taylor).

My main aim in this essay, however, has been to examine the records concerning women and men at Meerut to see what they

⁶² Precisely how many did so is, of course, impossible to say. But it seems to have been a fairly common practice. See e.g. 1100 of 29 Apr 1859 Military Proceedings, NAI, describing a Punjabi regiment in Moradabad (where Wilson worked, incidentally). I came across several such instances in the Military Proceedings of Bengal Army sepoys and sowars in the context of marriages that were deemed “fraudulent” and will be detailing these in future work.

⁶³ Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal*, p. 192.



reveal about the world that made the events of 1857—the hybrid world of the cantonment and its environs, especially its *sadr* or main bazaar. What emerges is a world of stark gender divisions and fraught emotions. And what is particularly striking about this world is that even as femininity was widely understood to epitomize utter weakness, cowardliness, and impotence—so much so that for a man to be perceived to be behaving like a woman constituted the most extreme degradation imaginable—the actual women of the cantonment bazaar were able (or were, at the very least, perceived to be able) to comment authoritatively on the masculinity of the soldiery. It would thus appear that the gender regime of north India came face to face with the new emotional style of the cantonment.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ For a wide-ranging discussion of emotions in history, see, in addition to the work of Rajat Kanta Ray cited above, Jan Plamper, “The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns,” *History and Theory* 49, 2 (May 2010): 237–265. My goal in the larger project of which this essay is a part is to situate the 1857 revolt in the hybrid emotional topography of the cantonment of mid nineteenth-century North India.