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### FLAVOURS OF IMPERIALISM: EXPLORING FOOD AND DOMESTICITY IN FLORA ANNIE STEELS'S THE COMPLETE INDIAN HOUSEKEEPER AND COOK

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**Abstract:**

*This paper intends to analyze food politics, imperialism and domesticity in Flora Annie Steel (1847-1929) and Grace Gardiner's advice manual The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook (1888). The author has created a unique narrative that portrays colonial domestic life, shares advice for creating a home in an alien land, and provides ideas to become an ideal mistress while keeping the racial superiority intact. The book shows the difference between a master/servant, colonizer/colonized, and ruler/ruled through the narrative of food. Indian cuisine has been an essential part of colonial family life. Socio-cultural orientalism has changed not only the plate but also the palate of individuals. The advice manual has become a meeting point of culture, attitude, and identity and also shares one's association/inclination towards food. This paper looks at creating a unique cuisine that blends both Indian and Western tastes of food keeping the difference intact. Food has reshaped its form and identity and shares the reference of nationalism, colonialism, power and authority.*

**Keywords: Food politics, imperialism, cuisine, power, domesticity.**

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*Lingers on the tip of my tongue,  
Gotta love the sweet taste of India.  
Blame it on the beat of the drum,  
God, I love the sweet taste of India.*

*(Aerosmith, "Taste of India")*

The article puts forward a question to the readers 'what is the taste of India?' Indian cuisine unlike any other cuisine has its own flavour, taste, aroma and form. Food is a universal phenomenon, it has no culture, no class, or specific identity, and to be exact it is something that nourishes the human body, and helps us to sustain. It has been variously associated with "life, survival, growth, death, love, sin, transience, memory and oblivion" (Rogobete 28). Food has taken a special place in art, literature, culture, and tradition but if

erased from all its baggage it simply tickled the palate and creates a lump of stool (Lee 192). If analyzed according to its taste, smell, cooking processes, and feeding habit, we have imbibed various cuisines that remap territories and organize them according to “olfactory criteria and distinguish among familiar, alien, threatening, sensual, spicy or dull spaces” (Rogobete 29). Cecilia Leong-Salobir states that the colonial cuisine is not “a deliberate act of imposing inimperialistic designs” (12-13) but it changes its meaning as it gets combined and takes a hybrid shape combining the Western and Indian foods, recipes by a native servant under the supervision of a memsahib.

The colonizer’s have created, constructed, and reshaped the native cuisine to make it acceptable to their superior taste and culture. The cuisine that was adopted by British men depended on various issues like availability of native food items, incorporation of western recipes, import of canned delicacies, availability of native servants, economic and social factors, professions and status of individuals, etc. The native kitchen in the British household has reshaped into a special gastronomic space where food has turned itself into criteria to distinguish people as superior/inferior, educated/illiterate, interesting/dull, colonizer/ colonized, white/brown and cuisine as acceptable/unacceptable, tasty/unpalatable, and organized/unorganized, etc.

Cookbooks have created a unique feminine discourse for a woman that is related to her private as well as professional space. It became a tool to record her daily life experiences, personal culinary skills, micro-histories, family habits, political viewpoints, socio-cultural framework, and religious inclinations as an individual identity. It acts as a record of domesticity and personal life along with a historical account which gives a detailed idea about a particular race, class, taste, preferences of food, and culinary habits, to be precise informs about the group of people. Theophano observes that cooking literature from the eighteenth century onwards become a professional space for women and the genre a tool to reach a wider readership (9). Food thus does not remain confined to a kitchen area but acts as a metaphor to act on issues like women's development, education, political position, suffrage, equality, motherhood, etc. Novels, cookbooks and advice manuals helped to portray feminine figures who are “energetic, strong, a benevolent partner in the imperial mission” (George 102). The white women who came flocking to the empire after the opening of the Suez canal changed the scenario of colonial life. The exile from their homeland approved them to take on independent projects, and create their own professional, personal and social identity which on one hand gave them authority and power and on the other hand issued them the freedom to mingle with the native culture. Breaking the shackles of the troop of being the ‘angel in the house’ they re-designed their life. Their influential existence and power create an aura that benefited to keep the superior hierarchical authority on colonial life. Fae Ceridwen Dussart opines that the English mistresses are doing a special superior service to the imperial society (707).

Household advice manuals that became a must companion for a newly arrived memsahib in the colony aspired to provide her with a “set of portable and practical mechanisms for safeguarding the British home in colonial environments” (Crane 163). Mary Procida states

that these manuals assisted the novice to cope with the new alien environment, its culture, food habits, and gives the required insight to solve the various problems of colonial life (126). The advice manuals are documents that provided a memsahib with various ideas of house management like methods of cooking, lists of groceries, arrangement of furniture, duties of the servants, an idea about camp life, arranging house dinners, socializing, etc. It prepares the innocent virgin mind (of a newcomer) to get complicated with issues of class, caste, hierarchy, superiority and provides an idea of how to create a 'home' in the alien land, take the role of the mistress of the house and protect her familial space against the native infiltration. The Anglo-Indian and British household manuals that flooded the printing markets in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century portrays the domestic sphere as a crucial cultural and hierarchal space. It narrates in a very submerged way the methods to adopt to keep the difference between the ruler and the ruled. Modhumita Roy opines that the Anglo Indian's always created a gap between the colonized and the colonizers. They preferred "to serve pies, roasts and potted meats in order to distance themselves from those they governed" (67). *Indian Cookery "Local" for Young Housekeepers*, (1883) or *The Cookery Book: A Practical Handbook to the Kitchen in India* observes that in most houses memsahibs preferred simplicity and economy while managing a home in exile.

The British home thus becomes the arena of politics to share the notion of one's own nation and helps to create an ideal familial value system to keep themselves aloof both psychologically and physically from the locals. The cookbooks and advice manuals became so popular that life without them is thought impossible for memsahibs. Dr. R. F. Riddell's *Indian Domestic Economy and Receipt Book* (1849, anonymously published) which came out from the Gentleman's Gazette press in Bombay become popular amongst British women and went into eight editions between 1849 and 1877. Indian army colonel Arthur Robert Kenney-Herbert's (writing under pseudo name Wyvern) work *Culinary Jottings for Madras* (1878) became a necessity in Anglo-Indian households. The guide books also shared recipes both Indian and Western to help the mistress in her kitchen.

The reason for the popularity of cookbooks and manuals in daily life is because of their household guiding possibility, feasibility and practicality. Documenting the household needs, narrating the techniques of servant management, guiding one to be a well-trained mistress of the household, and providing recipes to sustain in all circumstances in an alien world is not an easy task. The authors of this kind of literature are not only creative in their endeavors but also showed their minute witnessing skills in writing for their readers. The private life in an empire is as crucial and synonymous with organizing and maintaining political situations with the natives. These books are meant and written for those readers who needed help, support, consolation and guidance from their predecessors. They show the newly arrived memsahib a glimpse of the culture of imperial control to keep the subjugation of the locals uninjured and perfect. The white women who enjoyed more freedom in the colony than in their homeland, often acted as guardian angels to keep their racial superiority intact by controlling their helping hands in daily life. They become active propagators of the empire and in a way portrayed themselves as ideal mistress in their personal sphere like

their husbands working outside the home. The advice manuals showed the novice the ways to make the eastern chaotic life less burdensome and showed methods of easy escape to its readers. The writers while helping the memsahibs in creating one's own space also teaches to ascertain and maintain the difference between the ruler and the ruled intact. Mistress is not supposed to waste their valuable time toiling in the heated kitchen but to monitor the servants, scan her orders being perfectly and accurately maintained and supervise everything needful. The home of a white woman thus takes the shape of a miniature empire where intelligence, hard work, surveillance, judgement, and understanding are worked in equal force to keep power and authority intact. The mistress needs to work with both her brain and heart because without sensitivity and perception the control of natives would be an unobtainable task. Outlining the duties of the servants like ayahs, tailor, washer-man, cook, etc. is necessary and the advice books provided the memsahib with the required information. The moral justification that is required by these white people to keep the hegemonic discourse of inferiority, subjugation, deformity, and racial superiority is available in this literary genre in most cases. The pattern of eradicating anything unwanted, threatening and unfavourable to the taste of the superior culture of the British in the narratives is interesting as well as unsettling to modern-day readers. The manipulating nature of the white people in treating the natives as backward, uneducated, uncultured, and unorganized is a process and method to camouflage their racial, superior tendency of control and acts as a justification model. Creating a home in an alien space where nothing is under the control of a memsahib, the tool of superior autocratic control acts as an easy way out. These manuals, recipe books, and guiding literature acted as a backbone to erase moral judgement and human sensibility. It also draws/creates a gap to keep the difference between the master and the servant working. The books if seen from a superficial level remain unblemished but a deep insight will show the reader its true colour. The mistress who visited the empire kept these manuals as guidebooks and followed them deliberately in daily life.

The advice books that became an essential guide and act as a tutorial to young memsahibs, tried to re-organize a disorderly colonial home into a controlled space like the 'empire'. Maintaining the British standards psychologically, physically and materially is that Flora Annie Steel (1847-1929) and Grace Gardiner teach the memsahib's in their popular advice manual *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888). This book published in the nineteenth century is most widely consulted and it went into ten editions from its first publication in 1888 to 1917. David Burton exclaims that Steel is popular enough to be named "Mrs. Beeton of British India" (11). According to Indrani Sen, the manual became "a staple handbook" (16) for young white women who ventured to come into the colony. Ralph Crane and Anna Johnston deliver the book of Steel as "a lesson in ethics: specifically, the ethics of imperial rule in a colonial household" (171). Steel is much focused on advising her sisters as a predecessor to organize properly a colonial space and turn it into a home. She has a distinct idea about domesticity and her huge amount of travelling experience assured her of the required confidence to share it with others. She was

very strict about her concept, thoughts and wanted a devoted replica of her impressions by the newcomers. Her writing shows that the colonial home of the memsahibs allowed them to relish a superior authority from the native men and women which they never enjoyed in England. The authoritative self of these memsahibs helped them to secure their higher position in both private and public life making her an ideal companion for her partner in controlling, maintaining and manipulating the empire. Keeping the local indigenous people at bay they created a space for their comfortable living (Chattopadhyay 245). The white woman's newly designed subjective position according to Mrinalini Sinha has a "unique, yet contradictory, position in the masculinist colonial mythology" (46). The 'micro' empire or the home of the white woman may resemble the ideal empire if she fulfils her responsibility as an ideal wife to her husband, supportive companion to her sisters, intelligent mistress to her servants, caring mother to her child, etc.

Steel in her cookbook and advice manual prescribed and sketched the ways a household of the white residents should be maintained. She states "housekeeping in India, when once the first strangeness has worn off, is a far easier task in many ways than it is in England" (1). She was fluent in indigenous languages and outlined the same for her sisters, "no sane Englishwoman would dream of living, say, for twenty years, in Germany, Italy, or France, without making the attempt, at any rate, to learn the language. She would, in fact, feel that by neglecting to do so she would write herself down an ass" (2). She was an excellent cook and her recipes shared in the manuals prove it. The empire demanded from the mistress various duties amongst which serving an appetizing spread for white residents and friends was essential. Many memsahibs never bothered to visit the kitchen or take accounts of the household management or check the dealings of her helping hands; Steel strictly criticized them and advocated that "the Indian servant, it is true, learns more readily, and is guiltless of the sniffiness with which Mary Jane receives suggestions; but a few days of absence or neglect on the part of the mistress, results in the servants falling into their old habits with the inherited conservatism of dirt. This is, of course, disheartening, but it has to be faced as a necessary condition of life, until a few generations of training shall have started the Indian servant on a new inheritance of habit" (2). She is sure that organizing and supervising the servants is the most crucial job assigned to a mistress as they are the only connection a memsahib has with the outer native world. Relying on this class of people is essential as the mistress make a close relationship with her helping hands, without whom the white resident's household could never proceed smoothly. She assigns to be strict in managing her home, "The secret lies in making rules, and keeping to them. The Indian servant is a child in everything save age, and should be treated as a child; that is to say, kindly, but with the greatest firmness" (3).

British women are more interested in replacing the native mistresses from the lives of the sahibs than concentrating on creating a space where they could explore the empire, its culture, traditions and cuisine. Many of these women are not at all interested in the alien space and boredom became their only companion. They in many instances displayed distaste towards Indian food and the spicy concoction disgraced their fragile digestions.

Despising the cuisine of the natives is indeed a form to prove their superiority as a colonizer. French foods cooked with a dash of wine became more attractive and acceptable in the luncheons and dinner parties organized by the white people (Bobb 10). The British people are fearful of contamination of any kind with the natives. They always performed and maintained a distance from the helping hands without whose help a smooth running of life will be questioned. The attendants and cooks who serve food to their masters are often seen with contempt, assigned as dirty, unclean, stinking, etc. Sir J.W. Kaye's comment is interesting, he states, "one is wont to get wondrously indifferent to these black automata, and after a few months one learns to think of them no more than of the chairs and the tables" (141). The amount of contempt and disgrace showed by white people against those classes of natives who are literally indispensable associates of their existence is truly pathetic and disturbing.

*The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* strictly criticize any extravagance and cautions young mistresses from spending money or accommodating imported foodstuffs in daily life. The book has exceeded its characteristics of a manual as it shows and guides an individual in almost every stratum of life. It makes the management easy, hassle-free on one hand and the other hand dominates the mind creating a displacement from everything Indian. It silently criticizes brotherhood and distastes the idea of equality with the natives. The advice manual differs from other works of the same genre in many circumstances as it is more practically organized keeping the racial instinct intact. Steel has her unique style of home management where cutting down "Europe stores, extra servants, and swagger generally" (22) are thought appropriate and essential. Her guidance is practical and prudent in the colonial setting and creates manners/techniques for an easy comfortable living for a British family. Resilience, adaptability and flexibility are the three key ways that the book advocates memsahibs to imbibe for a fruitful colonial living. She has practically established and proved it with various examples in her book that to remain hierarchically superior to the natives an intelligent compromise with the colonial setting should be done without hesitation. She states local produce can replace imported items, "There are many good Indian fishes, so it is a mistake to despise them, and use English tinned fish on all occasions" (259). Economy, prudence and efficiency are the same all over the world and a mistress should know the estimate and proper use of the practical insights wherever required. Steel notices that without buying costly items one should use the native bazaar products. She clearly shares the ideal narrative of governance and the discourse of everyday life that need to be balanced in a proper way to maintain a happy home.

Flora Annie Steel has maintained a superior, racial and colonial standpoint while writing her manual of advice. In the fourth edition (1898) of the book, she adds a chapter dealing with 'native dishes' on request from memsahibs posted in various indigenous places. It is not understandable the reason for keeping the Indian recipes under the 'miscellaneous' section in the book. According to her, the native dishes are palatable but are "inordinately greasy and sweet, and...your native cooks invariably know how to make them fairly well" (368). In 1904 she adds a chapter on vegetarian cooking in the manual not to inculcate her

indebtedness towards the tasty dishes that were served in every colonial household but because she sees “any difference between killing a cabbage and killing a chicken” (370). Cookbooks and manuals that advise the newcomers about the alien life in many cases use taboos and show through the table of contents or by assigning specific names the socio-cultural discrimination and share a distinct British culinary sensibility and style (Maroney 123-24). Helen Pike Bauer suggests that due to various reasons like the unavailability and high price of canned foods make the Anglo-Indian kitchen gets used to fresh vegetables, meat, fruits, etc. in their daily diets (95). Mary Procida confesses that advice manuals and cookbooks showed an inclination towards local grown fresh foodstuffs for an overall proper growth of the future Britishers in the empire (141). Eating curries and pillows became a daily affair in the life of the memsahibs (Maroney 125). Curry along with other native dishes became anglicized and incorporated into the cuisine of the white people residing in India during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (311). In Calcutta, a meal is sought incomplete without, “delicious salt humps, brisket and tongues...superb curry and mulligatawny soup” (112). The reason for the compromise is loaded with meanings and needs elaboration.

Karen Chase and Michael Levenson observe that the colonial space of Steel is a “profuse garden of meanings” (80-81) and a site for complicated domesticity. Ralph Crane and Anna Johnston advocate that maintaining a colonial home is complicated and needs continuous mapping and monitoring of the kitchen after breakfast “or as near ten o’clock as circumstances will allow” the mistress to control her own ‘empire’ fruitfully (Crane 178). Steel’s experience as a British officer’s wife and her twenty-two years of stay in India helped her to renovate and modify native cuisine and alter the recipes to make it acceptable for the colonial table. Her trials and adventures as a memsahib taught her the rules, methods and processes to preserve, practice and proclaim the superiority of her race, class and food habits. She in many cases remains stubborn to keep the Englishness intact in her advice manual. She simplified her recipes and recommended compromise to her sister to lead a relaxing life. She attempted to mix the flavours of both the colonizers and the colonized and create an Indianised version of European dishes. Her imperial taste is never erased from the plates of the white people residing in the colony. Moreover, she camouflages her imperial instinct and produces recipes that are savoury, and interesting yet have an imposing and proud racial taste of her Western cuisine. She is on a quest for a home that can never be created in an alien land. “Home is imagined as a unique and distant place that can neither be discovered nor reproduced elsewhere and thus remains a site of continual desire and irretrievable loss” (Blunt 421).

Steel keeping her feminine emotions intact advocated addressing the masculinist, heterosexist project of Empire for the white women and imagines a special position going outside the realm of the home culture prescribed by the Western world. Her writing carries the baggage of imperialism and is a repository of ambiguity and snobbishness. Steel and Gardiner very confidently advocate the idea that “an Indian household can no more be governed peacefully, without dignity and prestige, than an Indian Empire” (9). She has a

clear understanding of the outcome of her writing and places the hegemonic idealisms on her younger sisters. Thus, her book became a tool to remap the superiority of the ruler over the ruled. Her intelligent, insightful knowledge as a powerful authoritative feminine identity can be traced back in her narrative. She prescribes her sisters to blend with the colonial space keeping the superiority of the master/mistress intact. She tries to camouflage her imperial flavour from her manual but fails to conceal it. Her imperialist attitude complicates the footing of the memsahibs who try to get acquainted with the empire and create a fellow feeling with the natives. She is of no doubt a talented author, an excellent mistress, a dutiful mother, a respectable memsahib but also a colonialist. She specifically advised to stick to Britishness and maintain the gap between the natives and the members of the ruling class. Steel observes that a colonial domestic life is “not merely personal comfort but the formation of a home - that unit of civilisation where father and children, master and servant, employer and employed can learn their several duties” (7).

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