Chapter One

First Impressions: 1857 in the Parliament and Press

On 22 August, 1857, the *Punch* carried a cartoon by John Tenniel titled “The British Lion’s Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger”,¹ where a white woman with a baby at her breast lies unconscious under a ferocious, snarling Bengal tiger. The tiger, however, has been pushed into a corner, and crouches in defence, as an even more ferocious lion pounces on it, transforming its attacking snarl into a defensive one. This is perhaps the best possible symbolic representation of the complexity of the triangular relationship and the power equation between the British man, the British woman, and the Indian man in post Mutiny India. Evidently the unprecedented violence of the Mutiny has upset the hierarchy of power between the colonizer and the colonized, based primarily on the concept of racial supremacy, with the white, and hence racially superior, memsahib (as helpless and powerless as the baby at her breast) being positioned at the lowest rung, lying supine under the native ‘tiger’. The ‘tiger’ or the Indian male, till then ridiculed for his effeminate ways, and generally treated like a pet animal to be leashed, controlled and rewarded for subordination, is elevated to a fearful beast of prey, and is clearly in possession of the unconscious white body of the Englishwoman. The ‘lion’ or the all powerful British master is still at the top, but has to struggle in order to retain its superior position threatened by the ‘tiger’ – he has been forced to attack to rescue and protect his countrywoman.

Any insurrection aims at reversing the existing power equation, and the Sepoy Mutiny was no exception, as the cartoon underlines. Had this representation been

¹ Appendix II, Fig.1
published in any of the Indian newspapers like The Friend of India or The Bengal Harkaru, it could have been an unproblematic glorification of the mutinous Sepoy posing a serious threat to the British master. Or, had it been simply a confrontation between the Indian tiger and British lion published in an English daily, the interpretation would be reverse but equally uncomplicated – the lion would, in this case, put an end to the tiger’s challenge. But in the Punch illustration the figure of the memsahib lying on the ground – mauled, mutilated, and mortally wounded, a helpless victim of the tiger – complicates the situation. The tussle no longer remains a familiar one between the colonizer and colonized, that could be unproblematically represented as one between the white West (the lion) and dark East (the tiger). The third presence, that of the memsahib, occupies a complex position in this critical moment, she is at once powerful and powerless; powerful because she white, and hence racially superior to the uncivilized native, yet powerless because being a woman, she is an easy target and victim of native violence. The strategic positioning of the memsahib figure in the cartoon adds a new dimension to the whole power struggle of the Sepoy Mutiny. It is implied that the lion is attacking the tiger to avenge the wrong done to the victim; she now becomes the cause of a retaliatory attack (The numerous British and European men who were killed in the sudden attacks of the rebellious sepoys and ‘badmashes’, as the disgruntled Indian civilians who joined in the loot and plunder were referred to, do not feature in the picture. They are similarly absent from the other narratives of ‘native savagery’ as well. It is only the woman who is granted the victim status, the dead and wounded men are hardly visible.). Thus, at another level, the Mutiny’s threat to British authority is also depicted as a threat to masculine authority, exposing its vulnerability. The female body is introduced in the rhetoric to absorb the force of the attack, as an attempt to manage the national, colonial and imperial crisis. She
subsequently is made to represent her nation; the tiger’s attack on her represents the
attack on the honour of the entire British nation. The lion’s attack on the crouching
tiger thus becomes retaliatory, inevitable, and, more significantly, morally justified.
The memsahib figure is thus very cleverly manipulated in the grand narrative of the
Indian Mutiny.2

I begin my examination of the memsahib figure in contemporary Mutiny narratives with this chapter which deals with the two very first Mutiny discourses - the British Parliamentary debates and discussions and the British press coverage. As the above analysis of the cartoon ‘The British Lion’s Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger’ illustrates, the memsahib figure in Mutiny narratives is a highly complex, multilayered, and skillfully manipulated representation, and I argue that the process of manipulation of her presence, and absence when required, began with the two initial and simultaneous narratives of the ‘terrible crisis’ posed by the Mutiny. One was the ‘official’ discourse - the Parliamentary debates and discussions, and the other, the ‘popular’ concurrent reporting by the British press – editorials and leaders, reports, dispatches and letters, cartoons, and periodical articles. I start my study by making a brief survey of Parliamentary records and press reports to trace the presence of the Englishwoman in Mutiny narratives also because, as the following chapter argues, the dominant representation of the Sepoy Mutiny and the Mutiny memsahib are highly influenced by these initial discussions, especially by the press reports, just as the early historical accounts are almost completely dependent on the personal writings and ‘eyewitness accounts’ published in the newspapers and periodicals.

2 Jenny Sharpe examines this allegorical representation of the memsahib figure in Mutiny fiction in her Allegories of Empire (1993). I have discussed and drawn on Sharpe’s analysis in greater detail in my chapter on Mutiny fiction.
Before the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, it took about a month for news to travel to London from India. But, as a *Calcutta Review* correspondent notes in June 1857, the distance between London and Calcutta was not merely geographical: ‘the feeling amongst Englishmen generally, whenever India is mentioned, is, either that of extreme apathy, or of extreme ignorance, or sometimes of both. There may be occasions when this stillness is broken by some startling event.’ The 1857 Mutiny certainly was one such ‘startling event’, which fired the imagination of the British Parliament, press and public alike. The news of the early May events in India did not reach London before the first week of June. Before June 1857, affairs of India hardly featured in the Parliament Debates, Motions or Resolutions, it was too remote a land to deserve regular mention or spark off heated discussions, except in occasional criticism and defence of East India Company policies. Moreover, as the *Calcutta Review* correspondent points out, the reason behind the empty benches of the senate during an India debate was the dearth of knowledgeable speakers: ‘It may be taken as the rule, that the men who then speak know nothing whatever of India, while the men who know India, are not there to speak.’

However, the apathy towards Indian affairs ended abruptly with the flaring up of the Sepoy Mutiny in May 1857. After the successive wars with Russia, Persia and China, the rebellion in India became one of the central topics of debate in the British Parliament. Ironically enough, though the Sepoy Mutiny (which was the title assigned to the rebellion, which was by no means limited to the army barracks either in scale or

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3 The usual mail route in 1857 was Calcutta/Madras/Bombay-Alexandria-Marseilles-London, which took 4 to 6 weeks.
in impact) was seen as an event seriously threatening Britain’s dominance in India, there was an unstated general agreement, as it were, not to give it the status of a war, or even a mass unrest. The Parliament, though divided on all other issues regarding the Mutiny, agreed, at various stages of the revolt, that what was happening in India was by no means a war or a mass revolution, but a mutiny, a military unrest, that was limited to a few regiments of the Bengal Native Army stationed in the northern provinces, and would not affect the rest of the colony. There was a conscious effort on the part of both the Indian and the British governments to restrict the impact of the insurgency as localized and temporary. As Disraeli put it: “It was like one of those tropical storms which burst so suddenly and which were so disastrous in their effects, but which were of short duration; and, in like manner, it might be hoped that after this unhappy mutiny was trampled out, as it must be, the horizon would be cleared and there would be a bright future.”

I have examined the British Parliament proceedings between June 1857, when the first reactions of the British Parliament on the unexpected crisis were recorded, and February 1858, when the news of the end of the siege of Lucknow on 30th November signified regaining of British control over the affected areas and unleashed a series of thanksgiving and commendations, in trying to locate the position of the Englishwoman in India in Britain’s unmistakably imperialistic official reaction to the Mutiny. During the initial months of the Mutiny the reaction and response in the British Parliament proceeded primarily along three lines, namely, denial, acknowledgement, and accusation.

News of the 10 May Meerut attacks and the following Delhi massacre began to trickle in in London by the end of June. The first reaction of the government, as

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6 Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 146, 1439
expressed by its spokesman Vernon Smith on the 29 June session of the Parliament was incredulity and denial. Benjamin Disraeli’s queries about the ‘endangered’ Indian empire, and ‘the ancient capital of Hindostan’, Delhi, being in the possession of ‘insurrectionary and rebellious troops’, are met with confident denial of the danger, “I say that our Indian empire is not imperilled, … I do not believe that any danger does exist further than what must arise from any outbreak which may happen periodically in India from fanaticism or other causes, to be put down as surely as the present outbreak will be. Therefore, I anticipate no danger to our Indian empire…”

Disraeli, however, not one to let go of any opportunity to attack the government, called attention to the ‘grave and critical emergency’ threatening the Indian empire –‘one of the chief sources of [our] wealth, [our] power, and [our] authority’, in a tone which was both scathingly critical and alarmed. He evidently sought to underline the gravity of the situation by using the rhetoric of natural disaster (‘great calamity’ and ‘extreme peril’) to describe a crisis which he himself initially identified as a military one caused by ‘insurrectionary and rebellious troops’. He demanded the customary explanation for the sudden revolt, and enquired whether the government had been forewarned, but at the same breath pointed out the responsibility of the East India Company as well: “This calamity has not been of a sudden nature; there have been … dark rumours from India, … occurrence of many perplexing incidents in that country, which, no doubt, cannot have been lost upon the

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7 Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 146, 537
8 Ibid., 542
9 Ibid., 537
10 Ibid., 538-40
attention and consideration of men charged with the responsible duty of administering
the affairs of an empire.”\textsuperscript{11}

The government’s initial stance of denial consisted of dismissal of ‘rumours’ of
general discontent, and blaming religious fanaticism of high caste Hindus or Brahmins to be the real reason of insubordination, as Smith’s reply shows: “There certainly has arisen of late an impression among the troops that there was to be a
general conversion of the Natives to Christianity; and the feeling of insubordination … broke out first in the 19th Regiment, with the refusal of the men to bite the new cartridges, which were supposed to be greased with an animal substance which they abhor.”\textsuperscript{12} The same ‘rumours’ of religious grievances among Indian sepoys let
Disraeli put the blame on the East India Company, severely criticizing its land reforms, military recruitment and religious policies. Attacking the ‘underofficered’, ‘maladministered’ and ‘unsatisfactory’ state of the army, he even demanded resignation of the Governor General of India, Lord Canning.\textsuperscript{13} Smith, however, justified his emphatic denial by reminding the members that the ‘delicate barometer of the state of public feeling’ - the Company’s stocks – have remained the same since the occurrences.\textsuperscript{14}

By mid July, however, as the telegrams and dispatches from Bombay, Calcutta and Madras regularly reported the rapid spread of the revolt from one North Indian town to the next, the tone got more serious. The 13 July debate had Prime Minister Palmerston admit that the ‘disaffection’ seemed to have spread, with a large number of Bengal troops having ‘disappeared’, though they have had a ‘complete success’ at

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 146, 538-40
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 536-45
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 538-40
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 544
\end{itemize}
Delhi, having ‘taken’ twenty six canons and pushed the mutineers into the walled city.\textsuperscript{15} The decision to divert the troops meant for China in addition to the 14000 men already sent to India, however, betrayed a panic, contradicting the earlier ‘success’ at Delhi. On 14 July, his tone acquired more seriousness, and some amount of ambivalence as well, as he assured the Parliament that the government felt “no apprehension or alarm as to the ultimate result of these unfortunate events, yet they [felt] it to be their duty to act as if there were real reason for alarm, and to leave nothing undone which is within the reach of administrative functions, in order to provide for any emergency that may happen, or might have happened, in India…”\textsuperscript{16}

In the same session both the East India Company and the government denied any prior intimation or ‘rumours’ of General Anson’s reports on ‘disaffection’ in the Bengal Army, in reply to John Walsh’s charge of neglect of such warnings.

Parliamentary sessions on India from August to December 1857 proceed along two main lines of argument – acknowledgement of the crisis and placement of the blame on the misgovernance of the East India Company on the one hand, and a denial of massacres and violence on the other. In fact, throughout the duration of the crisis, British Parliamentarians spent hours trying to ascertain the cause of the Mutiny, and either put the blame on the Company for its misrule, or the government for its apathy. Along with the dissection, came the preparations which betrayed the unspoken panic about the stability of the British empire in India. Session after session saw a preoccupation with, and long debates on, fresh recruits, troop mobilization, sailing routes, funds, strategies of regaining lost authority over the native army, and, indirectly, over Britain’s largest colony. A common allegation against both the governments was negligence of early signs or prior warnings of sepoy unrest. In

\textsuperscript{15} Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 146, 1368
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 1460
addition to this, during the early months, Palmerston’s ministers had to constantly answer anxious queries about the measures taken to curb the unrest, or replenish the army in India, and reassure the nation that all possible measures were being taken, and that the situation was under control. This often meant a deliberate denial of news of violence.

An interesting case is the reaction to the 30 June Cawnpore massacre.\textsuperscript{17} Details of the mass killing had reached Britain through several dispatches, official and private, yet it was dismissed in the Parliament as ‘complete fabrication’. On 14 August Earl Granville, the government spokesman, said,

> With regard to the rumour which has been alluded to of a dreadful massacre having taken place at Cawnpore, owing to General Wheeler having been deluded by the assurances of a Native, I have every reason to believe that the whole of this story is a fabrication. I have seen a letter from Sir Patrick Grant, in which he states it to be his belief that the rumour is a complete fabrication; and I have also seen a letter from the son of a gentleman who, writing from his regiment between Cawnpore and Calcutta, and speaking of the great alarm which had been caused by this rumour, says that they had been reassured by the discovery that the story was the invention of a Sepoy, who was to be hanged in consequence of the fabrication. … I do not wish to endeavour to diminish the horror of some of these massacres, which are most deeply to be deplored; but it is the opinion of the Government, … that, on the whole, the news from India just received is as satisfactory as could well have been expected.\textsuperscript{18}

In the meanwhile, Disraeli, in trying to ascertain whether the rebellion was a ‘sudden impulse of the soldiery, arising out of some superstitious feeling’ or an

\textsuperscript{17} The Cawnpore massacres, as we shall see, went on to establish itself as the most potent metaphor of Mutiny violence in public imagination.

\textsuperscript{18} Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 147, 1624
‘organized conspiracy’, stirred up what seemed to be the prevailing national sentiment regarding the cause of the revolt. The 31 July session recorded a debate on the negligence on the government’s side to pay heed to two reports. The first report was by Sir Charles Napier, the chief architect of British victory in the Persian War, where he allegedly noted several grievances of the native troops of the Bengal Army, suggesting remedies, which were disregarded. The second one was a letter by a General Hearsey of the Bengal Army which warned that ‘an ill-feeling is said to subsist in the minds of the Sepoys of the regiments at Barrackpore. A report has been spread by some designing persons, most likely Brahmins or agents of the religious Hindoo party in Calcutta (I believe it is called the Dhurma Sobha), that they (the Sepoys) are to be forced to embrace the Christian faith.’\^19 (Italics mine) This report is specially significant, as it refers to the resentment of a particular section of the native army, the upper caste ‘Hindoo’ sepoys, to the suspected ‘proselytising spirit’ of the Christian missionaries in India, thus referring to two key factors thought to be responsible for the rebellion at this juncture. The first forms the basis of the ‘conspiracy’ theory, which saw the Mutiny being the result of ‘deep designs’ by one or more of the several native groups – religious, political or military – who felt their interests were threatened by the British administrative policies.

During various phases of the Parliamentary debates on the Indian affairs, different figures were held responsible for this conspiracy rising out of resentment of British policies: Lord Dalhousie for his policy of annexation, Lord Canning for his leniency, the Christian missionaries for their forced conversions, along with the Company’s misadministration of the native army, were blamed for the revolt. It would be interesting to note here that the ‘conspiracy theory’ continued to appeal to

\^19 Ibid., 819
several commentators and historians as a plausible explanation of how the greased cartridge led to the revolt. One of the earliest Mutiny historians, G.B. Malleson identifies the ‘chief conspirators’ as the Maulavi of Faizabad, Nana Sahib of Bithoor and his deputy Azim-ullah Khan, a lady belonging to the royal family of Oudh, known as Begum, and the Rani of Jhansi.20 Alexander Duff, prominent Protestant missionary and author of *The Indian Rebellion; Its Causes and Results. In a Series of Letters*, wrote in a letter dated 3 June 1857, ‘the belief is, that some deep, designing men, taking advantage of the superstition of the sepoys, invented these falsehoods [about the intent behind the greased cartridges] to lead them to rise and overthrow the Government’21 Albert Pionke explains the significance of interpreting the insurgence as a mutinous conspiracy: ‘A conspiracy of only a few “deep, designing men” effectively preserves Asiatic inferiority for the majority of the rebels by eliminating their potential for agency even as it casts the few in charge as morally inferior to the British because of their propensity for violent secrecy.’22

The second factor is related to the first, and it still remains to many the main reason behind the revolt. Conversion from Hinduism to Christianity, forced or otherwise, not only threatened the convert with social ostracism, but also deprived him of his right of inheritance of ancestral property, which, the debaters believed, was a cause for serious concern, leading to the violent reaction to the rumour of greased cartridges, and finally to the revolt. However, for the present study, this phase of the Parliamentary stance is significant because it is at this point that for the first time, the

21 Alexander Duff, *The Indian Rebellion: Its Causes and Results* (London: Nisbet, 1858), 18
blame starts to shift from the East India Company and/or the government to the Indian soldier or sepoy or the ‘conspirators’.

As more and more reports of sepoy ‘atrocitys’ from Lucknow, Delhi, Jhansi, Benaras, Allaabad, Indore, Sealkot, Fyzabad, Sitapore, Agra, Gwalior, and numerous small towns with even smaller European populations started coming in, mostly in the form of eye-witness accounts or letters published in the newspapers, politicians’ speeches acquired a new tone. In the debates held during the last months of the Mutiny one finds the rhetoric of ‘punishment’, ‘retribution’ and ‘justice’ increasingly gaining prominence, sharing space with the questions of Company maladministration and government apathy. The general opinion was that the ‘ungrateful Indians’ deserved the harshest possible punishment for their ‘crime’, but, unlike in the impassioned cry for revenge in the letters published in the newspapers, the politicians expressed more concern for regaining lost authority and respect. In a long session on 11 August, with allegations like those made by Whiteside that ‘the Government had shown neither watchfulness, foresight, nor judgment; otherwise they would long since have discovered the real state of things in India,’23, Disraeli’s words best sum up the prevalent tone:

[I]f we make up our minds thoroughly to combat the difficulties which we have to encounter, we must bring an irresistible force into India before eight months are over, and we must accompany that irresistible force with some announcement of a policy which 150,000,000 of people may rally round with confidence and hope. So acting, it is my conviction that we may emerge from this struggle, not with shorn powers, not with diminished lustre, but with that increased character which always accrues to those who show that they have confidence in themselves, and that they possess energies which they know how to

23 Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 147, 1419
use with effect. Then, Sir, we may still hold India, we may still maintain our empire...

On the other hand, in a passionate argument for the ‘right’ punishment for the mutineers, the Earl of Ellenborough, considered death to be too heroic a punishment for the offenders, as Indians, he had observed, had very little contempt for death. He felt that death sentence added ‘grace and dignity to the cause’, showing it in a ‘heroic’ light. He therefore advocated the ‘ignominious punishment of flogging which no man can bear with the same degree of firmness with which he can meet the infliction of death. One is directed to the mind, the other to the body’. Earl Granville recommended transportation, loaded with irons, to the Andaman Islands, a punishment he felt will be much more dreaded by the Asiatic than death.

In the middle of allegations and counter allegations between Palmerston’s men, Disraeli’s followers and the East India Company officials, there was one point on which all three seemed to agree, albeit for different reasons. The Marquess of Clanricarde argued:

We are not at war at all with India. … It is a partial rebellion … but it is not a dangerous war, which will overtax to any degree the immediate resources of this country. There is no rational man, either in or out of this country, who thinks that our rule and empire in India are in danger

He laid bare the reasons behind the vehement denial from all quarters. Accepting the uncivilized, child-like, effeminate natives posing a serious threat to the British dominion would mean acknowledging the racially inferior Indian’s power to

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24 Ibid., 1434-35
26 Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 147, 1619
challenge the superiority of Europe’s strongest power. And, under no circumstances could that be allowed. The task before them was to re-establish British authority at the earliest, even if that meant a change in governance. ‘There is no difficulty … in our achieving success with the mutineers; but there is immense difficulty in re-establishing our authority throughout the country’, observed the Marquess of Clanricarde on 14 August. He recommended reorganization of the army and reframing the Indian Government, and next went to suggest a reform which would forever alter the Indo-British relationship:

And that is only part of the difficulties with which we have to contend … No man can deny that India has been misgoverned… nothing that could be adopted would be so likely to strengthen [your] power in India as an immediate announcement that the Government in this country had come to the determination to assume, in the name of the Queen, the government of India. … if it were at once made known to the people of India that the government of that country was hereafter to be carried on directly for the Queen, the Government of India would stand in a much stronger position than it can be while carried on in the name of the Company…. although we know how mercantile adventure and wisdom have raised this country, they are not a people who understand these matters so well as we do. The name of the Queen would be a tower of strength to the Government of India.27

Thus, in the Parliament’s official rhetoric of accusation and solution, of power and subjugation, of justice and order, the Mutiny was a consequence of a long history of colonial misgovernance based on misreading of native religious sentiments and social prejudices. But, as illustrated above, there was a conscious effort to minimise the effects of the Mutiny, the first strategy obviously being the use of the term Mutiny

27 Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 147, 1619-1620
to contain the mass rebellion within the limited sphere of a military unrest. The second strategy is more relevant to the present study as it involves the memsahibs and other British and European civilians. The above survey illustrates that the official rhetoric of the Mutiny hardly allowed any space to the non-military and non-governmental agencies, there was barely any official recognition of the individual British and other European civilians who were caught in the violence of the Mutiny, except enquiries about compensating them for the loss of property, and arranging for transportation for the freshly widowed women. One of the rare occasions when the British woman in India entered the military and political space of Parliamentary debates, was on 28th August when a demand was placed for immediate assistance and transportation to the ‘widows and orphans’.²⁸ There followed only a few more references to the widows and soldiers’ wives and building up of funds for them.

On the 8 February 1858 session which recognized the sacrifice and service of brave British soldiers in quelling the Mutiny, Prime Minister Palmerston declared,

I do not allude to those private afflictions which have been the consequence of acts of barbarity committed upon many occasions throughout India. That is an affair which, however painful it must be to the feelings of every man who has heard of those barbarities, is yet one with which it is not the duty of Parliament to concern themselves in their collective capacity. We look to what concerns the public service of the country.²⁹

And hence, the sensational and sensationalized ‘true stories’ of the memsahibs suffering ‘fates worse than death’ are conspicuous by their absence from the official debates and discussions on the Mutiny in the British Parliament because they do not

²⁸ Ibid., 2093
²⁹ Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 148, 870
fit into their nation’s imperial agenda of the moment. However, as the next section illustrates, these very figures and their fates, which are pushed to the periphery of the imperial political rhetoric, hugely dominate the press reports and reviews which had a much stronger hold on the popular imagination.

‘The only true history of a country,’ Thomas Macaulay once remarked, ‘is to be found in its newspapers’. Chandrika Kaul\textsuperscript{30} mentions several 19\textsuperscript{th} century newspapers that sustained and influenced reporting of the Indian subcontinent in London, as she studies how the editorial stance of individual papers coloured their coverage. Among these dailies and weeklies \textit{The Times} and \textit{Manchester Guardian} were the ones which showed a consistent interest in India, with the former taking a Conservative stance, and the less popular \textit{Manchester Guardian} being more inclined towards the Liberal views. However, as Kaul points out, their Indian coverage differed more in tone and context, than in content.\textsuperscript{31} In exploring the representation of the memsahib in contemporary newspaper reports I have concentrated on \textit{The Times}, treating it as representing the nineteenth century British press. Several factors have influenced my choice - \textit{The Times} not only had the best circulation figures in mid nineteenth century London, but was also the most influential British newspaper on India, with the largest financial outlay and a host of specialist leader writers. Moreover, it was the only daily with an extensive system of foreign correspondents in the subcontinent till 1858, when the Crown’s rule over India resulted in allocation of increased space for the subcontinent in the London press.\textsuperscript{32}


\textsuperscript{31} Chandrika Kaul, \textit{Reporting the Raj}, 54.

\textsuperscript{32} Chandrika Kaul, \textit{Reporting the Raj}, 59-60
Contrary to the politicians and leaders, the British press seemed to be sensitive to the recent happenings in India. Much before the Sepoy Mutiny threatened the apparent security of British power in India, reports of mutiny in separate segments of the Bengal Army were being published. But the Editorial of *The Times* on 19 May makes an almost apocalyptic prediction while reacting to the 31 March Barrackpore Mutiny\(^3\) which resulted in the 19th Native Infantry being disbanded. Calling the incident an ‘obstinate fanaticism’ of Hindoos (a charge that would be reiterated time and again in ascertaining the real reason behind the Indian disaffection beginning May 1857), the column urges the authorities to treat it as a forewarning, a threat to British authority in India, and to the image of a secure British empire so carefully projected to the rest of the Western world. It warns,

Suppose a station with only one or two companies of Europeans in presence of several thousand maddened Hindoos, - suppose a slaughter of British officers, the destruction of a barrack, the dispersion of several native regiments to their own homes, outrages committed far and wide, and the news flying in the usual Asiatic manner across provinces and kingdoms to the heart of Tartary and China; how long a time, how great an outlay, and how many brilliant achievements might it not take to efface the impression made on all those millions of men! British power can never afford to be suspected, and least of all in India.\(^4\)

On 8 June, the first reports of the Meerut incidents appear:

A telegraphic despatch received at Bombay from Meerut states that the 3d Bengali Cavalry were in open Mutiny. Several officers and men had been killed and wounded. It was reported at Calcutta that a

\(^3\) Sparked off by the Mangal Pandey incident, referred to in the Introduction.

\(^4\) Editorial, *Times*, 19 May, 1857
correspondence had been discovered in the possession of a native officer of the 34th Bengal Infantry proving the existence of a conspiracy for organizing a general rising of the entire army.\footnote{Times, 8 June, 1857}

The report hints at two factors as dominant explanations to the sudden uprising, both of which went on to be popular with contemporary British commentators and are in tune with the official Parliament reaction. Firstly, it is referred to as a Mutiny - limited to the disaffected segments of the Native Regiments of Bengal Army, and secondly it hints at the conspiracy factor (discussed earlier). The Bombay correspondent’s 11 May report appears on 9 June, which refers to the telegraphic message marring ‘that profound tranquillity … pervading the whole of India’ and links the Meerut outbreak to the ‘aversion expressed by the Sepoys of Barrackpore to the greased cartridges.’\footnote{Times, 9 June, 1857}

The first editorial analysis of the probable causes behind the Mutiny is published the next day which typically emphasizes the ‘gentleness of the Hindoo character’, and the ‘original want of a political unity and faith’ which have made Indians in the past ‘surrender[ed] more easily and totally to foreign masters’. Observing, ‘Revolutions of India have not been the work of a day’ it disagrees with Lord Ellenborough who blames Lord Canning and his missionary activities for the discontent, and blames the European officers of negligence of duty. It urges the Company to ‘extend the penalty to all who deserve it. Let it put all the European officers on half-pay, seeing that their neglect is the chief cause of these misfortunes.’\footnote{Editorial, Times, 10 June, 1857. A letter to the Editor published in reaction to the above report vehemently disagrees and says that the European officers that the writer has met are ‘active, enterprising, and often studious’. The letter-writer suggests increase in supply of books, ‘not trashy novels but useful books for manly minds’.
The next few weeks have *The Times* correspondents from Bombay, Calcutta and Madras send in daily and detailed reports of the progress of the Mutiny as well as of the measures taken to thwart the attacks. While one confirms that ‘The Mutiny in the Bengal army had spread in a most alarming manner from Meerut’\(^{38}\), there is another with standard assurances like, ‘Government was taking active measures to suppress the revolt, and was concentrating troops around Delhi’,\(^{39}\) or ‘A force is marching sufficient to overwhelm the mutineers in every quarter’.

The 14 July issue reports,

Many more regiments have mutinied, with more or less violence, but the military authorities have been, for the most part, ready and alert, and the crisis may be said to be past. Delhi has not yet fallen, but we are in daily, almost hourly, anticipation of hearing that such a blow has been struck at the centre of revolt as will annihilate the display, if not the spirit, of disaffectation throughout the country.\(^{41}\)

The 15 August issue quotes from the *Bombay Times*:

Delhi has not fallen till the 27th of June… there has been a good deal of fighting outside the walls, the rebels being defeated on every occasion with great slaughter…During the fortnight just elapsed we have received intelligence of the Mutiny of the troops at Moradabad, Fyzabad, Seetapore, Saugor, Nowgong, Banda, Futtehghur, Mhow, and Indore. ... Every man who owes us a grudge believes that the time has come to exact payment. No idea can be formed as yet of the utter state of disorganization which prevails in the

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38 *Times*, 27 June, 1857  
39 *Times*, 27 June, 1857  
40 *Times*, 29 June, 1857  
41 *Times*, 14 July, 1857
Upper Provinces. Trade is wholly destroyed, the public highways everywhere overrun by thieves; the dispossessed Zamindars in nearly all the villages have emerged into daylight, and ousted their successors. Scores of petty Rajahs have proclaimed their independence, and make up for defects of title by ceaseless activity in the work of robbery and murder.42

On the whole such reports do not deviate from the dispatches quoted and discussed in the Parliament, nor was the editorial stance of The Times any different from the typical imperialistic rhetoric of superiority, subjugation and power. However, these reports published over the six months beginning June, gradually start acknowledging something which the others do not. The following report on the state of Delhi does not stop at reporting the gathering of British troops outside the old capital, but adds, ‘Delhi was in possession of the mutineers, who had massacred almost all the Europeans without regard to age or sex, plundered the bank, and proclaimed the son of the late Mogul Emperor as king.’43 The 14 July issue carries a report from Delhi Gazette Extra, published at Agra. It first reports that the sepoys of the 54th had killed all their European officers, and then continues,

Meanwhile the people of the city were collecting for mischief; several bungalows at Deriowgunge had been fired, and as the day advanced the goojurs of the villages around Delhi became alive to the chances of loot, and were ready for action. The whole city was up in arms, every European residence was searched, the troopers declaring that they did not want property, but life, and when they retired the rabble rushed in and made a clean sweep from the punkahs to the floor mats.44

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42 Times, 15 August, 1857
43 Times, 27 June, 1857
44 Times, 14 July, 1857
What such reports focus on are the plights of civilians, men, women and children, who were either killed by the mutineers, or whose lives were completely jeopardized by the sudden but fast-spreading violence of the Mutiny. The lives (and deaths) of these non-military and non-governmental people remain unacknowledged in the official discussion primarily because acknowledging their plight would mean officially admitting the fact that the military unrest had acquired larger, more serious proportions and that the British empire was in danger. But the task of the British press during such a critical period was clearly twofold: it had to mobilize public opinion against the Mutiny as well as reassure the readers that all was well with their nation, in other words, their columns had to move the readers to condemn the acts of the mutineers without igniting mass paranoia. Thus one finds a conscious effort to strike a balance between tales of native barbarism and sagas of British valour, as the above extracts illustrate.

And, interestingly enough, the colonial Englishwoman is introduced to the Mutiny narratives right at this critical juncture, and goes on to play a pivotal role in balancing public sentiment. There are two ways in which her presence can be felt in the press reports, and I contend, that a combination of the two images was instrumental in mobilizing public opinion in favour of the British, in spite of evidences of negligence, misgovernance and mismanagement of the crisis at hand. She is primarily portrayed as the worst sufferer of the violence of the rebellion, as the following extract illustrates:

Extracts from letter of a young officer just arrived in Bengal, dated Chinsurah, July 11.

Were I to write you an account of the awful deeds the mutineers have perpetrated you would not, could not, believe it.
Such horrible, indescribable barbarities were surely never perpetrated before. You in England will not hear the worst, for the truth is so awful that the newspapers dare not publish it. The soldiers are furious, and whenever they get at the mutineers depend upon it the revenge will be commensurate with the outrages that caused it. Very little is said among the men and officers, the subject is too maddening; but there is a curious expression discernible in every face when it is mentioned – a stern compression of the lips and a fierce glance of the eye, which show that when the time comes no mercy will be shown to those who showed none. I will only disgust you with two instances; but, alas! there are only too many similar ones:– “An officer and his wife were tied to trees, their children were tortured to death before them, and portions of their flesh crammed down the parents’ throats; the wife then ravished before her husband – he mutilated in a manner too horrible to relate – then both were burnt to death.

Two young ladies named _______ (very pretty), were seized at Delhi, stripped naked, tied on a cart, taken to the Bazaar, and there violated. Luckily for them they soon died from the effects of the brutal treatment they received.

Can you wonder that, with stories like the foregoing (and there are plenty such), we feel more like fiends than men?45

Such emotional portrayals of the memsahibs being subject to inhuman torture abound in contemporary reporting of the Sepoy Mutiny. Another such moving account appeared on 29 August, reported from Sealkote:

45 Times, 1 September, 1857
Dr. Graham was driving his daughter thither, in his gig, when a trooper rode up to him and shot him dead. His daughter seized the reins, and drove screaming into the nearest compound with her father’s body in her lap. I think it fitting that you should know something in England of what your countrymen have been going through, or I should shrink from making public this poor young lady’s sorrow.46

Undoubtedly the most discussed and dissected incident in Mutiny mythology is Nana Sahib’s massacre of European prisoners in Cawnpore, first at Satichaura Ghat, and then at Bibighar. From the point of view of the Mutiny memsahibs’ representation too, Cawnpore plays an important role, as numerous versions and reconstructions of the massacres have created the stereotype of the ‘passive victim’ memsahib which, in turn, got embedded in post Mutiny public imagination as ‘the’ memsahib figure. Extracted below are several versions of the Futteygarh and Cawnpore incidents (or ‘massacres’ as they were better known as). It is highly interesting to note how the figure of the tortured memsahib gradually gains prominence over other victims – men and children - in successive retellings of the two ‘massacres’ attributed to the Nana Sahib of Bithoor – the Futteygarh killings and the infamous ‘Cawnpore well’ incident.

The following versions, excerpts from different newspapers, appeared in the 15 Aug issue of The Times. (Italics mine):

*The Englishman:*

Did the report of the massacre reach you of the Futteyghur fugitives? It surpassed in atrocity all that has hitherto been perpetrated. Europeans, men, women, and children, in 50 boats left Futteyghur for this place.

46 *Times, 29 August, 1857*
They were all the non-military residents of the place. On arrival at Bhitoor the NS fired on them…one round shot struck poor Mrs.__________, and killed her on the spot. The boats were then boarded, and the inmates landed and dragged to the parade-ground at Cawnpore, where they were first fired at and then literally hacked to pieces with tulwars. Report says no one escaped.

*Friend of India:*

Of all the villains engaged in these congenial pursuits, Nena Sahib would appear to be the most bloodthirsty. … He has organized a corps of assassins, and not a day passes in which some poor hunted European is not brought in and literally hacked to pieces. His last act of butchery was of a wholesale character, and it is a pity that he has not a thousand lives to make expiation for it. An alarm had broken out, - causelessly as it seems, - at Futtyghur, and *132 persons (men, women and children)*, in 50 boats, left that place for Allahabad, but none of them reached their destination. They had advanced as far as Bhitoor, when NS first fired upon them and then pursued them in dhingies. The boats were boarded and their occupants landed and dragged to the parade ground at Cawnpore. There they were huddled into a heap and fired at, but the work of destruction proving too slow, the wretches closed in with their tulwars and hacked them to death. Such an event has not occurred for ages, and yet so accustomed have Anglo-Indians become to these tales that they are not only too thankful that the portals of death were not rendered more horrible, that *the hapless victims were not dishonoured before they were slain.*

*Phoenix:*

A Gomashta, who left Cawnpore on the 18th, has written from Allahabad to the effect that Sir Hugh Wheeler was not only holding his ground but would probably continue to do so, as the insurgents were quarrelling among themselves and many of them had dispersed. This man mentions that the Marhatta chief of Bittoor and other rebels had
put to death nearly two hundred Europeans, including *above a hundred fugitives* from, as he says, Nynee Tal, but more likely from Futteyghur.47

On 2 September *The Times* Calcutta correspondent reported:

[Nana Saheb’s] first hostile act was committed *on the persons of fugitive ladies and children from Futteyghur and elsewhere, about a hundred in number*. (Narrates the same incident, but changes the ending) He then tied their bodies together and threw them into the river.48

A similar fate awaited the Cawnpore memsahibs, who, from being simply ‘barbarously murdered’ in one version, went on to be stripped, raped, beheaded, and even sold at the bazaar in various others, as the following excerpts show: (Italics mine)

On 29 August, *The Times* Bombay correspondent wrote:

[O]ne of the saddest episodes of the rebellion… Nena Sahib, the most thoroughly and most deservedly detested of all who have taken part against us in the insurrection…. was first brought prominently into notice in connexion with the fugitives from Futtyghur, who, according to a story never yet contradicted, and probably only true, were captured by him while dropping down the Ganges in boats, dragged ashore, and butchered upon the parade ground at Cawnpore. Then, a few days later, came the terrible news that…Sir Hugh Wheeler had been mortally wounded in an attack made upon him by the rebels; that the survivors, destitute of food and of ammunition, sought and obtained permission from Nena Sahib to embark in boats for Allahabad with their treasure, on surrendering the barracks and their arms; that they embarked

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47 *Times*, 15 August, 1857

48 *Times*, 2 September, 1857
accordingly, but had hardly pushed off when a fire was opened upon them, under which all perished, with the exception of the occupants of one boat, who for this time escaped, but were eventually taken, brought back, and massacred….We cling to the hope that the story is untrue which devotes the women of the force to a yet direr fate than sudden and violent dissolution, which avers that the miscreant disposed of them to his men by open sale in the Cawnpore Bazaar.\(^4^9\)

On 1 September *The Bombay Correspondent* reported:

[After General Wheeler’s death] they had neither food, water, nor ammunition; to remain there was to die. In this emergency they sent Mr. Stacy, the deputy collector, on the 27\(^{th}\) of June, to treat with Nena Sahib…The ingenuity of hell never before devised a blacker scheme of treachery than that deliberately planned by the Nena and shared in by all the rebels at Cawnpore, those rebels being Sepoys who for years had eaten our salt…. (After the Saticaura Ghat massacre, one boat had escaped) they were pursued, overtaken, captured, and brought back in triumph to the barracks, where the men were all shot, and the women reserved for a worse fate… their bodies were found in a well in the Assembly-rooms compound, bearing upon them marks of the most indecent and inhuman treatment it is possible to conceive.\(^5^0\)

On 8 September an officer of the 52\(^{nd}\) writes from Jubbulpore:

Won’t we just avenge our countrymen? Our orders are to destroy, burn, kill and hang… Cawnpore is said to have gone, and every European murdered… No punishment can be too great for these brutes, and our revenge will be awful, as we have no fear now of speeches about the mild Hindoos.\(^5^1\)

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49 *Times*, 29 August, 1857

50 *Times*, 1 September, 1857

51 *Times*, 8 September, 1857
The following message from Brigadier-General Havelock after the recapture of Cawnpore Cantonment, sent on July 17th was published on 16 September:

By the blessing of God I recaptured this place yesterday, and totally defeated Nena Sahib in person, taking more than six guns, four of siege calibre… *Nena Sahib had barbarously murdered all the captive women and children before the engagement.*

*The Bombay Telegraph*’s report was published on 17 September graphic details of the blood-smeared courtyard of such reports remained etched in public imagination of Britain for a long time afterwards. It begins with Havelock and the Highlanders entering the city on the morning of the 17 June.

Accustomed as they had been to scenes of slaughter, the spectacle that met their eyes nearly petrified them with horror. They marched straight to a place where they were told 175 women and children were confined, but on their arrival they found that they had come too late! They only found the clothes of the poor victims strewn over the blood-stained ground. The scene of this horrible catastrophe was a paved courtyard, and one of the Highlanders in writing to a contemporary says, “There were two inches of blood upon the pavement, and from the report that we got from the residents of the place it appears that, after we had beaten the enemy the evening previous, the Sepoys and Sowars entered the place where the unhappy victims were, killed all ladies, and threw the children alive, as well as the ladies’ dead bodies, into a well in the compound. I saw it, and it was an awful sight. It appears from the bodies we saw that the women were stripped of their clothes before they were murdered.” A feeling more terrible than vengeance arises at the heart at reading this… The history of the world affords no parallel to the terrible massacres… Neither age, nor sex, nor condition has been spared. Children have been compelled to eat the

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52 *Times*, 16 September, 1857
quivering flesh of their murdered parents, after which they were literally torn asunder by the laughing fiends who surrounded them. Men in many instances have been mutilated, and, before being absolutely killed, have had to gaze upon the last dishonour of their wives and daughters previous to being put to death. But really we cannot describe the brutalities that have been committed; they pass the boundaries of human belief… If ever a nation was made the instrument of vengeance of an insulted Deity, that nation is England; and we trust that she will strike and spare not. … Not a moment should be lost and long before Christmas the whole of India will be lying at our feet.53

The following excerpt was taken from *Bombay Times*:

General Havelock and his Highlanders were the first to ‘stem the wild torrent and turn the tide’… On the morning of the 17th July the force marched into Cawnpore. The soul-harrowing spectacle which there presented itself to them beggars description. The extent of the frightful catastrophe now became known. A wholesale massacre had bee perpetrated by the fiend Nena Sahib. 83 officers, 190 men of HM’s 84th foot, seventy ladies, 120 women and children of HM’s 32nd foot, and the whole European and Christian population of the place, including civilians, merchants, shopkeepers, engineers, pensioners and their families, to the number of about 400 persons were the victims of this satanic deed. The courtyard in front of the assembly rooms…in which the women had been imprisoned, was swimming in blood. A large number of women and children, who had been “cruelly spared after the capitulation for a worse fate than instant death,” had been barbarously slaughtered on the previous morning – the former having been stripped naked, beheaded, and thrown into a well; the latter having been hurled down alive upon their butchered mothers, whose blood yet reeked on their mangled bodies. We hear of only four who

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53 *Times*, 17 September, 1857
escaped – a Mrs. Greenway, wife of a merchant, and three Indo-Britons.54

The following excerpt from an officer of 1st Madras Fusiliers dated 18 July actually identifies one of the four who escaped.

[T]hey killed, or rather massacred, all the ladies whom they hitherto had spared in Cawnpore (except five or six who were concealed by their native servants). Miss Wheeler, the daughter of Sir H Wheeler, they say, killed five of these fiends with a revolver before they could get near her. What an heroic spirit she must have had. The sight of the place where these poor ladies were murdered is indeed awful. Long tresses of hair – dresses covered with blood – here and there a workbox or bonnet.55

The mention of Miss Wheeler actually brings us to the other group of memsahibs which this study focuses on. These women and their escape stories are now and then found in the newspaper reports of the Mutiny. They are women from various small towns or ‘stations’ like Agra, Jubulpore, Sealkote or Delhi, who managed to escape death by taking shelter in one of the forts or official buildings, or by fleeing, often with no other possessions except the clothes on their back, who faced the hardships of refugee life, but survived nevertheless. I choose to treat these memsahibs as the survivors, as opposed to the victims. Personal letters by these women written to relatives and friends were handed over for publishing, and appear frequently on The Times, to counter the predominance of the victim memsahibs, as it were. The 10 September issue has a letter from a ‘young Englishwomen of 19, and is

54 Times, 16 September, 1857
55 Times, 16 September, 1857
a wonderful example of the spirit which has been excited by the treacherous and basely cruel conduct of the Indian army’. She writes,

Murree, Punjab, June 27th. “I did not feel at all frightened… though it was enough to make one fear when one knows how they cut the ladies at Delhi into pieces before each other’s eyes; and as for the poor children, they set them in the burning sun with nothing on their heads, and gave them no water, till they went mad! It makes me so ferocious to think of it, I long to go and fight the wretches myself.”

The same issue contains letters from a lady from Agra, writing about her loss of property and discomforts of siege life at the Agra fort. Another writes from Jubbulpore: ‘The wretches have not spared innocent women and children – monsters of cruelty. Even ladies are getting quite hardened’, an officer’s wife writes from Meerut were they escaped from Delhi, noting the murders of men, women and children everywhere.

My study shall, in due course, explore the survivor figure in greater detail. But in this point, I would like to point out that both the victim and the survivor memsahib figures are exploited for the same purpose. Reactions to such reports were, as expected, seeped in sympathy for ‘the poor women and children’, and also stirred up a lot of hatred for the ‘barbaric Asiatic’ and considerable patriotic fervour. Reads a letter to the Editor on 6 July,

My heart is hot within me when I think that at every time these calumniated officers were pouring out their blood like water in a vain endeavour to arrest the effects of gross administrative folly and

56 Times, 10 September, 1857
57 Times, 10 September, 1857
misgovernment. And the poor ladies! And the innocent children! Well, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.”

Similar sympathy was shown for the women and children caught in the four month long siege of Lucknow, beginning 30 May. Writes a civilian from Lucknow, published on 5 Sept:

The most painful consideration is the number of ladies and women and helpless people who have fled for protection to the fort, and are now here. Upwards of 200 of these poor creatures are crammed into this narrow place, where it is impossible to describe their sufferings. Death would be indeed a happy release to many of them, and it is enough to melt the heart of the hardest soldier to witness their cruel privations, while it is wonderful at the same time to see the patience and fortitude with which they are enabled to endure the unparalleled misery of their position.

However, The Times reports certainly did not stop at reporting and evoking sympathy for the ‘innocent victims of native atrocities’, there was a larger imperial agenda, as is obvious from the following Editorial published on 26 October. In response to ‘journals of certain European States’ expressing their alarm at the ‘deprecations of vengeance’ and the ‘spirit of revenge which they assume to be rampant in British hearts,’ reports of which The Times had been regularly publishing, the Editorial clarifies:

It is undoubtedly true both that England will act and The Times will speak … and that the voice of the country does loudly demand that the sins of the mutinous Sepoys shall be visited with signal retribution. Such a policy, however … is so liable to be misinterpreted, and if

58 Letter to the Editor, Times, 6 July, 1857
59 Times, 5 September, 1857
misinterpreted would be so little conducive to national reputation, that we acknowledge an account of it to be due to the opinion of Europe. That account we are prepared to render, and in the face of the world we plead for our policy justification and duty – …. in times past have indulged in the worst passions of humanity in the hour of victory, but not for weeks together, not apart from the maddening excitement of battle, not with all the refinements of protracted torture, not with indignities schemed and studied expressly to degrade the victim. These atrocities, - literally unspeakable,- were committed long after the first outbreak of revolt had set the Sepoy mind in a flame; they were committed on unresisting and helpless captives, where there had been no conflict to stimulate passion, where there was no danger to dictate cruelty, and where no motive of any kind could exist except the deliberate wish to abuse and dishonour England itself through this treatment of its children. If we say that the scenes of such deeds should be marked for ever, do we say more than justice warrants or than revolted humanity suggests? … Yet in all these records there is not one crime so dreadful as those in India, where the perpetrators have been represented by an entire army, and the sufferers by an entire nation. Such crimes we are compelled to avenge by the first instinct and the first duty of man – that of self-preservation; for a people which could overlook such offences would not only be outraging the maxims of justice, but would forfeit all public respect, and with it all national security.60 (Italics mine)

The editorial vigorously justifies British retaliatory violence which far surpassed that of the mutineers as just retributive measures against Indians, as well as the newspaper’s decision to depict the violence on its pages. However, as we follow its argument, we cannot but become increasingly alert to the successive modifications of the victim’s identity. From ‘unspeakable atrocities’ on ‘unresisting and helpless captives’, the rhetoric moves on to ‘abuse and dishonour of England itself through this

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60 Editorial, *Times*, 26 October, 1857
treatment of its children’ – the helpless captives become representatives of their nation, their abuse and dishonour, violation of England. Finally the Mutiny becomes an attack by ‘an entire army’ on ‘an entire nation.’ Such nationalistic rhetoric justifying violent revenge is neither unusual nor unexpected of a national newspaper as The Times. But what strikes us is its validation of ‘using’ images of the violated British women initially to arouse sympathy (here she is grouped with the other civilian victims of Mutiny violence); then to mark the extent of native torture (at this stage she is singled out, while the men are shot, she is forced to watch them die, her children too are killed before her, and then she is subject to the ultimate humiliation and dishonour); and finally to justify British retaliatory violence. The third phase, in fact, is the most interesting and ironical one - while she is made to represent ‘the entire nation’, it is now her absence which speaks. Havelock’s men work themselves up in a rage when they find, upon arriving a few hours too late, ‘long tresses of hair – dresses covered with blood – here and there a workbox or bonnet’ in an empty courtyard covered in blood. As evocatively portrayed in the Bengal Harkaru illustration, the memsahib seems to have played her part and disappeared for the men (represented by the lone soldier surveying the scene of disaster) to take over. Thus the part that remains unsaid in the forceful rhetoric of the editorial is that the colonial Englishwoman features in the reports not as an essential or integral part of her nation’s imperial project, unlike the men, but because her abused body fits into Britain’s imperial propaganda. The initial British rhetoric of the Mutiny is thus founded on the exploitation of the sufferings of the colonial Englishwoman, and, in the process, manipulation of her body as the prime target of violent native attacks which demands even more violent retribution in the guise of justice. Though there

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61 See Appendix I, Fig. 2
exists a parallel representation of the survivor memsahib, but the focus still remains her plight and suffering.

The reaction and response of the British periodical press was not much different from that of the dailies. Surprised by the rapid turn of events, the authors tried to ascertain the causes, report progress, calculate damages, and, most importantly, justified Britain’s imperial policies regarding India. Numerous articles, essays and reviews appeared during and after the critical period. Albert Pionke identifies three distinct genres of periodical articles dealing with the Indian Mutiny.62 The first type of articles, like ‘Crisis of the Sepoy Rebellion’ in The London Quarterly Review63 and ‘Indian Mutiny’ in the Quarterly Review64, usually written by veterans of Anglo-Indian service, offered critical summaries of the latest dispatches, Parliamentary reports, and expert opinions; and appended more or less lengthy dissertations on Indian history, politics, religions, and customs. The second group consisted of nonfiction accounts of Indian topics apparently unconnected with recent events. Essays like ‘The Grand Mosque and Imperial Palace of Delhi’ in Bentley's Miscellany65 provided lessons in Indian history, art or architecture designed to subtly mold readers' underlying attitudes towards the subcontinent.

It is the third group of articles in Pionke’s categorization that demands our attention, as I consider this group to belong to an interesting, transitional stage in Mutiny narratives, a stage between fact and fiction. Taking a ‘literary’ approach to the Indian Mutiny, these articles are often in the form of fictionalized letters, or fictional

63 ‘Crisis of the Sepoy Rebellion’, London Quarterly Review, January 1858
64 ‘Indian Mutiny’, Quarterly Review, October 1857
65 ‘The Grand Mosque and Imperial Palace of Delhi’, Bentley’s Miscellany, November 1857
accounts of English adventures in India inspired by actual letters. Among these are the series of letters from John Company to John Bull, in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*\(^{66}\), beginning with ‘A Familiar Epistle from Mr. John Company to Mr. John Bull’. This fictional genre of articles grew increasingly prevalent as the Mutiny wound down in 1858-59 and periodical writers shifted from communicating the extent of the factual rebellion to controlling its figurative implications. Such innovative fictionalization of the raw materials of the telegraphic messages and dispatches may be considered as the intermediary stage between the sensational press reports and the voluminous Mutiny novels. The finest example of such treatment and transformation of news into fiction is undoubtedly Dickens and Collins’s thinly disguised Indian Mutiny allegory ‘The Perils of Certain English Prisoners’ written for the Christmas 1857 issue of *Household Words*. The narrator, Gill Davis, is an English soldier sent to protect the British West Indian island of Silver Store from attacks by pirates. He saves the English on the island from the machinations of the ‘native Sambo,’ Christian George King, a ‘double-dyed traitor’. King, like the ‘infernal villain’ Nana Sahib, not only betrays the English colony but participates in the massacre of women and children during the pirate assault that ends chapter one written by Dickens. In the second chapter by Collins, the English escape the pirate stronghold and raft down the river to freedom. In the concluding chapter by Dickens the islanders are rescued by English marines originally decoyed away from Silver Store through the actions of Christian George King. They return to the island, now vacant of pirates, and kill their

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\(^{66}\) *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, January 1858, March 1858, September 1858
mutinous former servant, whose dead body is "left hanging to the tree, all alone, with the red sun making a kind of a dead sunset on his black face". 67

Pionke notes certain recurrent rhetorical strategies in these periodical essays which are evidently designed to represent the British Empire and its soldiers in the most favourable light possible. The most prominent of such strategies are to downplay Indian commitment to the rebellion by portraying the rebels as conspirators, and to represent Indians as ‘rapacious savages menacing the virtue of Britain’. Articles like ‘The Company's Raj’ and ‘Our Indian Empire’ both in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 68 follow this strategy and highlight reports of real and imagined attacks on Anglo-Indian women to incite feelings of chivalrous outrage at home that would excuse almost any level of military retaliation on the subcontinent, once again resorting to the same policy of capitalizing on the memsahib figure.

This study would certainly remain incomplete without reference to ‘the other side of the picture’, i.e. the report of the famous war correspondent John Russell who was appointed by The Times ‘to investigate the rumours of atrocities against British men, women and children which filled the air and to inquire into the circumstances of the failure of British rule in India which had brought to light by the Mutiny’. 69 Begins Russell,

I was moved to the inner soul by the narratives which came to us by every mail, and I felt that our struggle against those monsters of cruelty and lust must be crowned by Heaven with success. But after a time I began, mail after mail, to seek for evidence of the truth of those

68 Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, January 1858, March 1858
disgusting anecdotes glossed with still more revolting insinuations. I never doubted them, but I wanted proof, and none was forthcoming … all the stories we heard emanated from Calcutta, and the people of Calcutta were far from the districts where, no doubt, most treacherous and wholesale murder had been perpetrated.70

Once he starts traveling within India, his doubts about the reports become stronger. On 5 February he writes from Raneegunj, 120 miles away from Calcutta: ‘Bye the bye, “the authorities” here tell me they have not seen or heard of any mutilated women passing through this station, or going by rail to Calcutta.’71

On 8 February he is at Nowbutpore bungalow, destroyed by the Dinapore mutineers. Russell observes, ‘the roof was new, the walls blackened with smoke. Wherever a bit of white could be found it was covered with the writing of men of the various detachments passing up towards Cawnpore. ‘Revenge your slaughtered countrywomen! To -------------- with the bloody Sepoys!’72

His 14 February journal entry reads,

I have been very anxious to find out all particulars about the Cawnpore massacre; but as yet all is obscure…. One fact is clearly established; that the writing behind the door, on the walls of the slaughter-house, on which so much stress was laid in Calcutta, did not exist when Havelock entered the place, and therefore was not the work of any of the poor victims. It had excited many men to fury - the cry had gone all over India. It had been scratched on the wall of Wheeler’s entrenchment, and on the walls of many bungalows. God knows the horrors and atrocity of the pitiless slaughter needed no aggravation. Soldiers in the heat of action need little excitement to vengeance.73

70 Ibid., 3-4
71 Ibid., 18
72 Ibid., 21
73 Russell, India Mutiny Diary, 35
His explanation for the British reaction to Cawnpore is that ‘the peculiar aggravation of the Cawnpore massacres was that the deed was done by a subject race – by black men who dared to shed the blood of their masters, and that of poor helpless ladies and children.’ Towards the end of his trip, on Mat 29th he writes from Fatehgarh,

We sat in the very room where some of our ill-fated countrywomen were massacred by the sepoys. Mylne told me that he had no doubt two women were blown from guns, and that some children had been placed against the targets on the practice-ground as marks by the men of the 10th and 41st BNI. These were acts of barbarous savages. But were our acts those of civil Christians? All these kinds of vindictive, unchristian, Indian torture, such as sewing Mohamemedans in pig shins, smearing them with pork fat before execution, and burning their bodies, and forcing Hindus to defile themselves, are disgraceful, and ultimately recoil on ourselves. They are spiritual and mental tortures to which we have no right to resort, and which we dare not perpetrate in the face of Europe.

Russell’s observations are in line with Karl Marx’s remarks about the Bangalore clergyman’s ‘eye-witness’ account of the Delhi massacres. Reporting for the New York Daily Tribune, Marx felt that the letter was written by ‘a cowardly person residing at Bangalore, Mysore, more than a thousand miles, as the bird flies, out of all knowledge of the matter.’

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74 Ibid., 29
75 Ibid., 161-62
76 On the 25 Aug Times, a clergyman wrote from Bangalore: ‘They took 48 females, most of them girls of [sic] from 10 to 14, many delicately nurtured ladies, - violated them and kept for the base purposes of the heads of the insurrection for a whole week. At the end of that time they made them strip themselves, and gave them up to the lowest of the people to abuse in broad daylight in the street of Delhi. They then commenced on the work of torturing them to death, cutting off their breasts, fingers, and noses, and leaving them to die. One lady was three days dying.’
distant from the scene of the action.’ His efforts at finding the truth about the Mutiny are followed by several official enquiries and subsequent denials of the stories of violence against women. William Muir’s ‘Memo on Treatment of European Females’ (Enquiries into the Alleged Dishonour of European Females at the Time of the Mutinies) and Edward Leckey’s 1959 ‘task of discriminating between truth and fiction’ an exposure of exaggeration and misrepresentation of facts about the Indian Mutiny were somewhat delayed but successful attempts at breaking the ‘rape myth’. But to the contemporary imagination, Mutiny violence had already been synonymous with ‘death and dishonour’ of the white woman in India. The strongest impact of such ‘First Impressions’ of Mutiny violence was to be felt, as the following chapter discusses, on Mutiny fiction, which assembled and assimilated the available material to create an impressive body of fictional representation of the 1857 Mutiny and its memsahibs.

Coming back to *Punch*, the September 1857 issue carried another John Tenniel cartoon. The cartoon titled ‘Justice’ shows the white female figure (Justice personified), jaws set in determination, brows furrowed, brandished sword in one hand and shield in other, trampling upon, and towering over, a mass of natives, men as well as women. Clearly a message to all voices of protest against the indiscriminate and brutal ‘retributive’ violence of such officers as Havelock, Neill, Renaud and Cooper, who not only killed Indians irrespective of age, sex or occupation, but also set fire to miles and miles of Indian countryside, it declares the victory not only of

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79 Edward Leckey, *Fictions Connected with the Indian Outbreak of 1857 Exposed* (Bombay: Chesson & Woodhall, 1959) xvi

80 Appendix II Fig 3
Britain, but of Justice as well. One is obviously reminded of the supine helpless white woman of the earlier Punch cartoon published in August, where she lay powerless under the clutches of the Bengal tiger, with the British lion ready to pounce upon the enemy to save her. In this representation she embodies Britannia (though it will be a while before India will officially be a part of Queen Victoria’s empire), triumphant, avenged, and powerful once again. I read the two *Punch* cartoons as two phases of the journey charted for the memsahib in the Indian Mutiny mythology; one depicts her public humiliation and ‘unspeakable torture’, while the other, her revenge. There is an apparent difference in the two representations - the first finds her sprawled on the ground, helpless, powerless, and passive, while the second sees her lead, towering over her enemy, the dark, dwarfed natives. But, I would like to argue here, that the difference is superficial, because the representations merely exploit her passivity and apparent agency to justify an imperial agenda which, at this stage at least, keeps her at the periphery of action. Once again her figure is manipulated to represent a national crisis which threatened to go out of hand, and legitimize uncontrolled violence in the name of Justice.