

Memsahib

Tara L. Masih

Summers in my village, nestled in India's Himalayan foothills, are not as oppressive as those further south. That is why during this country's colonial days, the British, fleeing the unfamiliar, ovenlike heat of the plains during the hotter months, made these villages into hill stations for their summer homes.

As a child, I remember catching whisperings of discontent regarding the foreign neighbors. Usually they came from Uncle, spitting remarks on "cantonment" around the hookah stem clenched between his teeth. Too young to understand the malice in his voice, I could only take the word by its definition: Colonizers take hold of the land--in our village it was Granite Hill--and in their Imperial way strip and clear it as a foundation for their Western-style homes and military offices. Just outside our village, they were close enough to keep a vigilant eye on us, yet far enough away to avoid becoming too familiar.

My friends and I spied on their cantonment from behind the safety of the thick pine trunks that grew from the back of the hill, and wondered why these "visitors" got to live in such orderly, sparkling, white-washed places, while we, who belonged to the land and forests and meadows, had to remain in stone structures and cottages that were mostly dirt-colored and full of holes and unelectrified darkness.

But that was my only negative thought about the colonial relationship, just a glimmering, really, besides being resentful that the military had taken over our playing field for their military games. And clean new bungalows rearing up from recently scarred earth was all I envisioned when I heard "cantonment." So when I caught sight of the Bari Memsahib--the first white woman I had ever seen outside of a Tarzan movie--she was not the state governor's wife but a maharani, a queen, pale skin like a goddess, gracing our small village. For only a queen would be preceded by a retinue of attendant scouts, be surrounded by four stiff guards in blinding white tunics and turbans, draped in royal red cloth, emblazoned with lotuses in fine gold thread and little hand-cut mirrors, belted at the waist. Such colour and display of wealth attracted a band of followers, mostly children.

When the weather was fair, and the early morning or late afternoon light left slanting shadows, she walked from the cantonment, guards at right angles to her, never varying their distance, four comers to her, the center. We did not recognize them, and concluded amongst ourselves that they came with the military entourage from Delhi.

Memsahib was not as splendidly dressed as were they, but authority resonated from her raised arm and extended to the height of her steady parasol. My memory of what she wore is weak--a blur of feminine skirts, shawls, boots--but that ruffled parasol was the untouched white of the mansion from which she emerged. Her face, pale and translucent as alabaster, shadowed and serious with a mission, was impervious to the dusty, staring crowd.

I could never see into her eyes. The guards kept us at a proper distance. "*Nazdik matjao*, don't get too close," they snapped at anyone who dared step into the royal circumference. What I could see was a mouth bright with lipstick. I had never seen lips so red.

When she stopped in her approach to the village center, we stopped and waited while she tilted her head and prospected the view. I also tilted my head and looked where she did, trying to glean what was so special about this wall, or that yard. I could never anticipate where she would stop. She picked the strangest places to set her slatted seat and prop her large canvas--usually a comer or sidewalk facing the old part of Rajkor. As onlookers, we looked at each other, amused, but of course we tried to hide our amusement out of respect.

This was the moment her band of followers fell away. But I remained, my imagination captured, staring hard at the streets and roofs, paved and shingled with slate quarried from nearby, at the stone buildings, walls crumbling in places, and at the painted woodwork framing them, peeling and blistering under hot sun.

"*Hatto!* Move away!" a guard cautioned me once. I had unconsciously been shifting towards her in the road dust, drawn to one particular painting I can still see, could even paint myself if I so wished. Memsahib's face remained calm, absorbed, the quiet expression of the artist under the spell of creation unbroken by my transgression. Her knife was putting finishing touches to her vision of the scene before us --the sweet shop in early morning, the white sun, not yet risen to its noon pitch, in the eastern part of the sky casting the doorway and window beneath turquoise-striped awnings in strokes of flat black shade. Gray-pink was dabbed onto the sun-bleached walls, remains of an undercoat of bright pink, of an edict ten years prior to paint the entire village pink.

Much time was spent on the outside, on the wandering, nameless *sadhu* who decided that for today, this was where he would rest. She found the right colour to paint the round copper begging bowl, lying in the curve of his wrinkled arm. A pale suggestion of a pai dog slept in a horizontal stroke in the shade. Flies buzzed around both sleepers, but she didn't add those. Brown hens, pecking around the doorway, added spots of burnt sienna and brown madder.

"*Hatto!*" It was not until the guard's cry that I realized my feet had brought me too close. I was pulled forward by the painted scene, so ready for me to enter. I belonged there, both inside the undeveloped shop darkness and outside in the branding sun.

And at that moment, the voice of warning--"*Hatto!*" --still resonating in the crisp air, I understood and felt, in a child's limited yet full way, the divide. She belonged where she was, on the outside looking in, the observer making her statement on the provincial scene framed with her colonial mind-set.

Indian independence came, finally, the following August of '47. Rajkor rejoiced for days with fireworks and festivals when the British, along with the state governor, left. His wife had stopped painting our village, had probably returned to Britain for safety. No matter, I was too angry at her in my newfound awareness, in my loss of innocence about her people, to watch the

memsahib paint anymore.

With great gusto, Uncle refilled the clay bowl of the hookah with his most fragrant tobacco. "This is a fine day for Rajkor. A fine, auspicious day for India. I am glad to be alive on such a day." The family agreed. We tuned in to the more elegant words of Nehru: "At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. . . when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance."

Today, the memsahib is more than memory. She is part of the landscape of my mind as well as an old fixture in an environment as colorful as was she. And fifty years later, on this anniversary of our independence, my anger is reduced by the soporific of passing time. I pause from the scene I paint --of mountains, of a Hindu temple, of a stream or valley--and take pleasure in the expression I feel resting on my face, that same, other-worldly, absorbing expression of the artist with whom I am now able to acknowledge a bond. Some things, such as our commonalities, should never be denied or repressed. They are what keep us connected, yet independent.

Above the cot where Uncle spends his final days, fingering his bedsheets, hangs one of her early landscapes, salvaged after the exodus. His eyes, while open, continually search the impressionistic vista of Granite Hill for his own meaning. I, in turn, search for my own.