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Research Article





Representations of Interracial relationships in *Voices in the Night* and *On the Face of the Waters* by Flora Annie Steel

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Abstract

Interracial relationships and marriages were a controversial matter in colonial India. During the first few decades it was fairly tolerated as a measure of convenience by the British colonial power. But as the years wore on, attitudes began to change and rigidity set in. Such relationships were no longer encouraged and they also entailed many disadvantages for an Anglo-Indian in the social life of Anglo-India. In this article, I have tried to show how Flora Annie Steel, a female Anglo-Indian novelist, has presented interracial relationships at the turn of the 19th century in two of her novels. I have shown that she has remained truthful to reality. By showing such

relationships from different perspectives, Flora Annie Steel has proved that such unions were unwanted and undesirable to both the concerned communities in British India.

Keywords: Flora Annie Steel, Interracial relationship, Anglo-India, Anglo-Indians, Cultural dynamics, Cross-Cultural Narrative

Flora Annie Steel (1847 –1929) was a leading Anglo-Indian writer. Some critics even compared her to Kipling. She lived in India for about 22 years from 1867 to 1889 (MacMillan, 2007: 245). Her husband was an Engineer in Indian Civil Service. She spent most of her time in Punjab in India during her 22-year-long stay in the Indian Subcontinent. Most of her works are about British India and its people. Both *On the Face of the Waters* (1897) and *Voices in the Night* (1900) were praised by the critics and reviewers for their truthful portrayal of British India.

In British India, like every other Englishman and Englishwoman, Steel remained firmly confident of the racial supremacy of the Europeans over the native population. Her novels perfectly reflect this attitude. Steel's most remarkable novel *On the Face of the Waters*, published in 1897, is no exception. Unlike some of her contemporary Anglo Indian novelists, Steel condescended to highlight some native characters in her novel. But when it comes to dealing with the theme of interracial love and marriages, Steel does not show any inclination of deviating from the well-trodden path. Not only does she not want to allow interracial marriage to take place, she also avoids depicting Indian men and white women falling in love with each other. In the rare case when she shows such a possibility turning into reality, she does that only to exhibit the undesirable consequences of such a union. Apparently she presents such a portrayal only to discourage possible union of people from different races.

In the 18th and early 19th centuries in India, it was permissible for an Englishman to form liaison with an Indian woman. This was inevitable as there were only 250 women against 4000 men in Calcutta in the early 19th century (Dalrymple, 2002: 410-411). In 1809, there were three Englishmen for every Englishwoman in India (Nussbaum, 1995: 174). The Indian woman was often kept as a mistress though many of the British employees of East India Company also married native women and kept the house in Oriental style. But such Englishmen were in the minority and most chose to keep Indian mistresses rather than marrying them (Dash, 2005: 220). No matter what the type of relationship between the Englishmen and Indian women was, it led to a greater understanding between the two races.

But things began to change after 1800 and after 1810 it was not fashionable to show interest in things Indian (Dash, 2005: 219-220). Hibbert in his seminal study of Indian Mutiny mentions that by the 1840s, living with an Indian mistress or wife was in decline. Any Englishman doing that used to become the butt of derision from the European quarters (Hibbert, 1978: 57-58). Gautam Chakravarty also refers to the period from 1820s to 1840 as the turning point of British attitude to intermarriage with the Indians (Chakravarty, 2004: 90). By 1835, East India Company prohibited senior Company officials from marrying Indian women (Agnew, 2017:138). By the mid 19th century intermarriage with Indians and Eurasians became a 'symptom of degeneration', though white men did not discontinue the practice of patronizing

Indian prostitutes and keeping Indian mistresses (Parry, 1972: 32). Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters* presents just such a picture of British life in India. The novel's protagonist Jim Douglas, in the earlier part of the narrative, passes his days quite happily with a high class naturalized Indian prostitute as his mistress. He purchased this Persian girl from a house of prostitution and thus liberated her. But nowhere in the narrative does he even deign to think of marrying Zora, his Indian mistress, despite spending several years with her.

Douglas's alias 'Greyman' seems to suggest that he hovers in an interim zone between the English and the Indian ambience. As Jean Fernandez puts it, his 'preoccupations with racial honor displace orientalist passions.' After the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the British and the Indians grew further apart and it became more desirable on the part of the British rulers to assert their superiority and difference. This could be best done by replicating English home on the Indian soil, excluding all Indian traces. This could only be done by making sure the presence of an Englishwoman on the home turf. Thus on the Delhi rooftop house what could be an Eastern zenana with the loving care of Zora almost becomes an English home at the hands of Kate Erlton (Fernandez, 2015: 24). Moreover, despite all her devotion to Douglas, Tara always remains just at the edge of domestic idyll on the Delhi rooftop. So it was inevitable that in spite of Tara's usefulness before and during the siege of Delhi in 1857 when the Indian Mutiny took place, she was rendered useless when the siege came to an end and, on the whole, the Mutiny was largely quelled. So it is no wonder that Steel would get rid of this unwanted character as she has done before with Zora.

In another era, Jim Douglas could think of marrying of Zora and settling firmly with her in India. That era was gone. As William Dalrymple has shown in his book 'The White Mughal', in the last part of the 18th century and the first quarter of the 19th, a great number of Europeans went native by marrying Indian women and adopting Indian lifestyle. The protagonist of his book, James Achilles Kirkpatrick, the British Resident in Hyderabad, married the great niece of the Prime Minister of Hyderabad in 1800 (Dalrymple, 2002: xxxii, Introduction). His adversary General Joachim Raymond, a French mercenary at the Hyderabad court, also followed suit in 'going native' (Dalrymple, 2002: xxxiv, Introduction). Dalrymple mentions that the period from 1770 to 1830 was the time of the heyday of British-Indian intermingling in every sphere (Dalrymple, 2002: 10). This time was a far cry in 1857 when Jim Douglas goes about his business in British India. He would, by all means, avoid thinking about the Indian woman Tara as his life partner. Already the practice of keeping a mistress, which he followed in living with Zora, was becoming an obsolete custom for Anglo-Indians.

Steel has shown her Indian women as passionate and their passion. They, without resorting to reason, knows only how to capture the hearts of the males whom they passionately love. As Jim Douglas thinks about Zora: "The world had held no more for her save her passion for him, pure in its very perfection" (Steel, 1897: 37-38). Eastern women were a puzzle to Douglas. Despite living many years with Zora, they were a mystery to him: "the mystery of such womanhood as Tara Devi's and little Zora's oppressed him. Their eternal cult of purely physical passion, their eternal struggle for perfect purity and constancy, not of the soul, but the body; their worship alike of sex and He who made it seemed incomprehensible" (Steel, 1897: 80). Thus

the Indian women, as evidenced through the characters of Zora and Tara, stand in sharp contrast to the cool and rational White women. This somewhat negative portrayal serves to add to the distractions of interracial relationships in Steel's narrative.

On the Face of the Waters which is set in the year 1857 also addresses the problem of white women's being greatly outnumbered by white men in British India. The narrator states that there are 'twenty men in [Anglo-Indian] society to one woman' (Steel, 1897: 154). This explains why Jim Douglas has affairs with two married white women and one Indian woman in the course of the novel (for the first of them he lost his job with the army). The presence of fewer white women often led to such unpleasant outcome and often made the practice of keeping Indian mistresses inevitable, at least up to the time of Indian mutiny in 1857. This watershed event gave rise to further distancing between the ruling Anglo Indian society and the native Indians which ultimately made interracial marriage almost impossible. Thus 1860s became a transition period of Anglo-Indian social history when marrying Indian women or keeping Indian mistresses became largely disapproved by both Anglo-Indian society and the government (MacMillan, 2007: 55).

Flora Annie Steel inherited such an outlook and racial prejudice. Though she wanted to know the essence of India and was sympathetic to Indians, it was her firm belief that East and West could never meet. In her autobiography, she declares that Kipling was quite right in writing "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" (Steel, 1930: 220).

In the novel *On the Face of the Waters*, Tara was saved from being burnt on the pyre by Douglas' intervention, but it only created new problems for her as she was ostracized by her society. She is then given shelter by Douglas and employed as maid-servant in his house where he lived with his Indian mistress Zora. Tara is madly in love with Douglas. She wants to have Douglas as her life partner but never says it in so many words. Douglas clearly realizes what she wants from him but uses her devotion to his own advantage. Douglas never ever entertained the idea of indulging Tara's passion for him, let alone marrying her. His own passion for Zora might pose a deterrent at first. But even after the death of Zora, no loving feeling for Tara arises in Douglas's mind. About sixty years ago in Calcutta, Job Charnock, the founder of the city, married just such a girl whom he rescued from being burnt on the pyre (Dalrymple, 2002: 22-23).

By the end of the 19th century when Steel wrote the novel *On the Face of the Waters*, racial tensions in India had reached its peak point in that fateful century (Agnew, 2017: 168). *On the Face of the Waters* is written in the 1890s after the fateful decade of 1880s when the Ilbert Bill created an uproar among the Anglo-Indians. In Allahabad in a protest meeting, a speaker even accused the then Viceroy Lord Ripon of encouraging intermarriage between Europeans and Indians (MacMillan, 2007: 271-272). It was next to impossible for Steel, even if she wanted it, to show interracial marriage and love in a positive light. In fact, Steel, in this novel, seems to subscribe to what Kipling's narrator says in the story 'Beyond the Pale': "A man should, whatever happens, keep to his own caste, race and breed. Let the White go to the White and the Black to the Black. Then whatever trouble falls is in the ordinary course of things – neither sudden, alien, nor unexpected" (Kipling, 1889: 155).

Greenberger writes that in the later part of British rule in India, “inter-marriage or even concubinage between the races” was greatly disapproved in the Anglo-Indian novels as the novelists often blamed such unions for producing offspring possessing vices from both sides (Horstmann, 2016: 184-185). Steel also believed this to be the fact as she writes in her autobiography: “So far as I can judge to-day the offspring of their unnatural coupling is bastard, bereft utterly of the fine qualities of both races” (Steel, 1930: 220). For this reason, Jim Douglas heaved a sigh of relief when he came to know that Zora’s child had died. In most Anglo-Indian novels, the Indian woman in a mixed relationship with a white man ends up dying and makes the way clear for the European man to marry a European woman (Horstmann, 2016: 185). Sending Tara Devi to her death through her act of self-immolation (suttee), Steel also manages to remove the racial other and ‘re-establish the British order.’ Moreover, she was a foil to good, feminine English women as Tara was ‘fierce, jealous, suicidal and rather masculine’ (Roye, 2015: 7).

In Anglo-Indian novels, the novelists always followed a common pattern in which an interracial relationship is shown to be always faltering towards the end of the narrative either because of the betrayal of the Indian woman or his death (Sharpe, 1993: 99). Conforming to this predictable approach of the contemporary Anglo-Indian novels, Steel also stages the convenient death of Zora and relieves Jim Douglas of his inevitable psychological burden in the future as his mixed-race descendents from this relationship was sure to suffer in the Indian social system both at the hands of the British and the Indians alike.

By the early years of the 19th century, the mixed-race population in India was beginning to feel the pinch. In 1791, the Court of Directors decided that Eurasians would be debarred from entering Company’s civil, military or marine service. Anglo-Indians were dead against allowing Eurasians into responsible official positions in India. They were of the opinion that the presence of Eurasians in higher echelons of the government would result in the loss of respect for the Europeans in the eye of the natives (Ballhatchet, 1980: 96-98). Even the famous James Skinner of the Skinner’s Horse, a Eurasian himself, was forced to consider his mixed blood an obstacle in his career. He felt that his mixed racial inheritance ‘like a two edged blade, was made to cut both ways against him’ (Dalrymple, 2002: 317). Such possibilities also troubled Jim Douglas. Looking at Zora in her deathbed, he thinks: “It was not she, drifting to death so contentedly, who was alone! It was he. Yet some men he had known had seemed able to combine the two lives. They had been content to think half-caste thoughts, to rear up a tribe of half-caste children; while he? How many years was it since he had seen Zora weeping over a still little morsel of humanity, his child and hers, that lay in her tinselled veil? She had wept, mostly because she was afraid, he might be angry because his son had never drawn breath; and he had comforted her. He had never told her of the relief it was to him, of the vague repulsion which the thought of a child had always brought with it” (Steel, 1897: 38).

The uncertain fate of mixed-race children pained Douglas so much that later in the novel, on seeing an English child called Sonny in Kate’s lap, he thinks: “Here he was looking at a woman who was not his wife, a child who was not his child, and feeling vaguely that they were as much a part of his life as if they were. As if, had they been so, he would have been quite

contented. More contented than he had been on that other roof. He was, even now, more contented than he had been there. As he sat, his head on his hand, watching the pretty picture which Kate, in Zora's jewels, made with the be-tinseled, be-scented, bedecked child, he thought of his relief when years before he had looked at a still little morsel lying in Zora's veil. Had it been brutal of him? Would that dead baby have grown into a Sonny? Or was it because Sonny's skin was really white beneath the stain that he thought of him as something to be proud of possessing; of a boy who would go to school and be fagged and flogged and inherit familiar virtues and vices instead of strange ones?" (Steel, 1897: 357)

Douglas's feelings after the death of Zora is remarkable: "...his freedom had come too late. He hated himself for thus bracketing death and freedom together, but for all that he would not blind himself to its truth. Now that his profession had gone with the King's exile, Zora was, indeed, the only tie to a life which had grown distasteful to him..." (Steel, 1897: 35). His life with an Indian mistress became almost unbearable to him as Douglas attests in these lines. Without expressing categorically, he wanted freedom from this bond all along. With the death of Zora, he got what he wanted. His feeling at that moment caused unease in his mind, but his sense of relief was too clear to ignore. He wanted to be himself again (all these years in the employ of the king of Oude, he maintained the name Greyman) and go back to England again. But this longing is verbally expressed only after he gets over his infatuation and passion for Zora.

Mrs. Gissing, another character in the novel and the paramour of Major Erlton, married a Eurasian but he got conveniently himself killed to make her second marriage to a European possible. Her marriage to this man of dark blood was like a dark blot on his life.

Voices in the Night (1900) also deals with the problem of interracial marriage. The ill-matched marriage between Chris Davenant or Krishn Davenund and Genevieve Fuller is pointed out in the beginning of the novel. In *On the Face of the Waters* Steel showed interracial relationships but stopped short of marriage in such relationships. In *Voices in the Night* she not only shows marriage between an Indian and a European but also presents the male in this relationship as an Indian. This was a rarity in the whole corpus of Anglo-Indian novels and short stories. An Indian man's marrying an Englishwoman was almost a taboo in British India. Even in the last part of the 19th century we get an instance when even British Government in India objected to an Indian Maharaja's marriage to a common British woman. Viceroy Lansdowne tactically tried to discourage the Maharaja of Patiala from marrying a Miss Florry Bryan (Ballhatchet, 1980: 116-117). In 1918, a policeman, during a divorce trial, told the judge about his wife: "I remonstrated with her for being so low as to misconduct herself with a native" (MacMillan, 2007: 48). It was almost unthinkable for an Englishwoman to even flirt with a native Indian, let alone marrying him. So under the circumstances, the interracial marriage of Chris and his wife was quite controversial during those times.

For his wife, Chris has sacrificed everything: "She has made him sacrifice home, friends, relations; prints his cards Mr. and Mrs. Chris Davenant--his real name is Krishn Davenund--and so tries to hang on to the frayed edge of society." (Steel, 1900: 7) Chris, a man of bookish knowledge, was infatuated with Miss Genevieve Fuller as he had limited interaction with the English society though he met her in London while studying there. She was a 'vulgar girl of good

taste" (Steel, 1900: 65). Mrs. Chris clearly realized what Chris Davenunt was: "[H]e was better-looking and better-bred than any of her other admirers" (Steel, 1900: 66). After eighteen months of their marriage, Mrs. Chris comes to the realization that she has done a great mistake: "It had been a hideous mistake, of course; but she was shrewd enough to see that the shock of finding, on his return to India, that there was literally no place for him in it had been quite as painful to her husband as to herself. So she exonerated him of blame, with a sort of contemptuous pity and an absolute lack of sympathy" (Steel, 1900: 66). She decides to try her luck elsewhere and relieve Chris of her psychological burden. She toys with the idea of leaving Chris as they were "only married at the registrar's" (Steel, 1900: 68). She assures Chris that she had no objection to his marrying a woman of his own race. The marriage does not work for her anymore. As she is ostracized not only by the relations of Chris but also by the Anglo-Indian society, she gets restless more and more in her loneliness. She says to Chris: "I'm not going to pretend any more, Chris! It doesn't work. I tried it at first because--well! because you mean well, and I like to make things comfy while I can. But I'm sick of Shark Lane" (Steel, 1900: 68). She threatens to go out the house if Chris continues to live in Shark Lane. Chris' protest leaves no impression on his wife's mind and she seems to be determined to get relief from this charade of a married life.

Steel here shows that the word 'wife' conjures up quite a different picture in an Indian's mind from the one in an Englishman's mind. As Chris abandoned every one of his own class to remain with Viva (as he called his wife), and was not ready to let her go, he could still think of the glaring difference between an Eastern wife and an English one and how he had been deprived of his due in this respect: "Wife! the word conjured up such a different idea in the hereditary experience which inevitably underlay all things in him, that he could go no further in bewilderment" (Steel, 1900: 69). This only serves to highlight the disparity and incompatibility between the two societies at least in terms of interracial relationship.

Curiously, Steel has shown resistance and opposition to such marriages from the native quarters only. She does not write about any resistance from the relations of Mrs. Chris when her marriage took place. In Anglo-India, no Anglo-Indian openly criticizes their marriage except Mr. Lucanaster. It is curious that the only person who openly criticized the interracial marriage between Chris and his wife should be this Lucanaster who is not an Englishman. He is a merchant possibly from Greece. Jack Raymond, the protagonist of the novel, in the very beginning of the novel, emphasizes the sacrifices of Chris which he endured for the sake of keeping this marriage intact, but his remarks also point out how great the opposition of the relations of Chris was to this marriage. Though nobody among the English society in India opposed the marriage categorically, there are some scenes where faint traces of disapproval of this marital relationship can be discerned from the English society. For example, when Mrs. Chris received a diploma from the Lieutenant Governor of the province, almost all the English officials present there smiled, apparently for her 'her willingness to enter into social relations with the other race' (Steel, 1900: 313). But the narrator expresses a hint of uncertainty about that which can only mean that this smile over everybody's face is ambiguous and it can mean anything, even contempt and disapproval.

Still the narrator seems to accuse chiefly the natives for making this marriage fail. Chris's mother, the girl Naraini who was selected for Chris as wife by her mother, the Swami or family priest of Chris's family and other relations of Chris in Nushapore want Chris to abandon this marriage and marry someone from his own caste, preferably Naraini. But interestingly, Chris who did not want to be separated from his English wife in the beginning of the narrative often in the later part of the novel thinks about the ideal image of an Indian wife in the form of Naraini. This shows the incompatibility of the East and the West at least on the marital ground. Through Chris's thinking about an ideal Indian wife whom he could easily get in his life, the narrator shows the hollowness of interracial marriage. While Mrs. Chris yearns for English society along with all its gaiety, Chris can only think of his missed chance of getting a submissive and caring woman just like Naraini. When he gets stuck outside of his home for a night, he thinks: "Being Sunday, he would not be missed till noon, for his wife was a late riser. Even then she would not be alarmed; indeed, he had often stayed out all day without her taking the trouble to ask where he had been" (Steel, 1900: 111). Against this, the modesty and femininity of Naraini act as a strong attraction for him.

Chris is torn between the two choices of leaving Viva and marrying Naraini or maintaining the charade of marriage with Viva. His wanderings in disguise as a Brahmin mendicant around the town rouses a distinct thought in his troubled mind: "How many years was it since he had seen a Brahmin woman worshipping her husband? That had been his mother, and he might have had such a wife as she had been to his father, if he had chosen; almost, if he chose. The suggestion repelled yet attracted him." (Steel, 1900: 111-112) After meeting the Swami, his hesitation begins to trouble him more: "How could he give up the past with its good and evil, the future with its evil and its good? Putting himself aside, for the truth's sake, what ought he to do? God! how powerless he was!" (Steel, 1900: 277). With the passage of time, Chris comes to realize how great the difference between his ideal woman and his wife is. When Ellison, his foreman, sings a song to himself that describes an ideal English female lover, he can only think in self-pity to himself: "This is what he had found in the poets of the West! This was what he had sought in the prose of life! It was for this he had forsaken so much--this white-robed woman with the breezes cooling the hot blood, and the trees crowding to shade her from the fierce heat of noon! And he had found—what? Something worse?— yes!— for one brief second he admitted the truth that it was worse; that Naraini, despite her ignorance, would have given him something nearer to that ideal of all men who were worth calling men, than Viva with her cigarettes, her pink ruffles, her strange mixture of refinement and coarseness, of absolute contempt for passion and constant appeal to it. Why had he ever forsaken his people? Why had he ever forsaken her— Naraini?" (Steel, 1900: 154)

As the novel progresses, the psychological distance between the man and wife grows more and more. It becomes almost impossible for Chris to detach his wife from the clutches of Mr. Lucanaster and when he entreats Lucanaster to let go of his wife at a party in the town club he simply retorts to Chris: "Don't be an idiot, my good man. What the deuce have you got to do with an English lady?" (Steel, 1900: 183) Jack Raymond comes to the rescue of Chris and duly handed Mrs. Chris over to him in a dogcart. At that moment, "Chris tried to wring his hand and

say something grateful, with the result that Jack Raymond felt he had been a fool to interfere, since the catastrophe must come sooner or later. The sooner the better. It was always a mistake to prolong the agony in anything" (Steel, 1900: 183). Even a sympathetic character like Jack Raymond feels hopeless about the sustainability of the marriage. The effeminacy of Chris clearly hurts the British manliness in Raymond and he only hopes the marriage ends as soon as possible. Undoubtedly Raymond maintains that this marriage is ill-matched and the consequences of this interracial marriage can only be bad, even worse if it lasts for a few more years.

As Viva wanted to be left alone, Chris takes up another house nearer his mother's house. But he belongs to none. All the houses are insufferable to him. He does not fit anywhere: "For he had not been home since he left the 'memorable occasion'; neither to the home in Shark Lane, nor the home in the city, nor that betwixt-and-between home in the garden of plantains. In a way they all claimed him, and yet they were all alike insufferable, impossible to the man himself" (Steel, 1900: 324). Though the British government itself introduced Western education in India, most of the English novelists had only contempt for such Western educated Indians in their works. Novelists like Flora Annie Steel have repeatedly shown the incompatibility of such figures in both Anglo-Indian and Indian societies. Chris is shown to be a victim to the indoctrination of Western values and ethics which makes him an alien in his own country. His marrying an Englishwoman makes matters worse for him and further isolates him from his own native society. As he belongs nowhere in Nushapore, he has only one course left for him. As he disappears from the scene (or vanishes) at the end of the narrative, he clearly leaves a vacuum neither in his marital relationship nor in the native society. Social order was again reestablished with his disappearance.

Despite being self-avowedly sympathetic to India and Indians (though this sympathy was quite paternalistic as is evidenced from her writings), why should Steel still retain the idea of racial superiority of the white people over the natives of India? Edmund Candler seems to answer the question in his autobiography where he calls the whole thing a 'chemical' process. Thus he presents the white men's racial prejudice as rather a spontaneous and automatic process for which he could not be held responsible (Parry, 1972: 153). But it is also interesting to know that Steel herself may have mixed-race blood in her veins. The research by Rebecca J. Sutcliffe reveals that there is every possibility that either Steel's grandfather or grandmother was a mulatto in Jamaica but their white complexion soon facilitated their integration into the white society of the island. This was legally possible during this time (Sutcliffe, 1990: 68-69). Her own interracial heritage may have made her more sensitive to any prospect of interracial relationship either in real life or in fiction. So, by staging the self-immolation of Tara Devi at the end of the narrative, Steel confirms, as Nancy Paxton asserts, 'an ideology of nationalism that defines chastity and social purity as signs of the evolutionary superiority of English men and women.' (Paxton, 1992: 26) In *Voices in the Night*, Steel sends Chris to certain death to make way for reestablishing the social order that was disturbed by the marriage between Chris and Viva.

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