

**Survival and Acceptance in Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters***

By **Danielle Nielsen**, Murray State University

<1> In 1896 Anglo-Indian novelist Flora Annie Steel published *On the Face of the Waters: A Tale of the Mutiny*, a novel that interrogates what it meant to be an unchaperoned British woman during the 1857 Uprisings.<sup>(1)</sup> Steel's novel challenges conceptually dominant Victorian ideologies of race, gender, and the home while illuminating the complicated position that Victorian women held in India as racially superior yet gendered and subordinate. The text speaks directly to the colonial administration, the cultural differences perpetuated by the popular ideology of the white man's burden, and the burgeoning feminist movement of the late nineteenth century. Kate Erlton, Steel's protagonist, embraces Hindu practices as she seeks protection from the sepoy rebels, and Alice Gissing, a married woman, flaunts her sexuality through a public affair with Kate's husband. These two women represent the diverse physical and intellectual positions Anglo-Indian women inhabited, and the novel illustrates the restrictive nature of Victorian mores, encouraging social change by portraying women who successfully take control of their own lives, even in the face of mortal danger. *On the Face of the Waters* portrays Anglo-Indian women who challenge gender, cultural, and racial stereotypes, representing an altered colonial relationship and creating a new Uprising narrative.<sup>(2)</sup>

<2> *On the Face of the Waters* relates the story of the Indian Uprising of 1857 from the vantage of three centers: the King of Delhi, the Indian soldiers and their allies, and the English army that takes Delhi. Steel situates Kate Erlton, the wife of a philandering English major, at one center of the narrative, creating a gynocentric colonial narrative not generally found in canonical colonial fiction. The narrative shows Kate's movement from the British "home culture" into India's culture.<sup>(3)</sup> Her willingness to look outside of traditional English practices and adopt those of the Indians facilitates at first, her survival during the Uprising, but by the end of the novel the new customs allow her autonomy not afforded by other Britons. I refer to this ability to adapt and adopt Indian customs as "situational transculturation." Revising Mary Louise Pratt's concept of "transculturation," I argue that Kate's travel outside of the home culture and her integration into the "contact zone" transcends Victorian gender distinctions because she frees herself from English expectations.

<3> Though few fictional accounts portray British women challenging or even exercising power outside of the home in the Empire, historical accounts demonstrate that women were not simplistic arbiters of imperial policy. In *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism, and Modernity* Angela Woollacott investigates the different ways that young

Australian women found greater freedom in England than in Australia. Woollacott explains that “distance (both geographic and cultural) from familial and colonial contexts, as well as the vast scale of the metropolis, gave women opportunities to push at gendered circumscriptions” (51). While the Australian women moved *out* of the colony and *into* the metropolis, the Anglo-Indian women who moved to India moved *out* of the colonial metropolis (and their devised metaphors for that metropolis) and *into* the colony. Like the Australians that Woollacott describes, the British women who felt constrained in England had the opportunity to find freedom in the colonies because they too could separate themselves with both a geographic and cultural distance from what they felt was an oppressive culture. This is especially true for women who went alone to the colonies to educate Indian women in zenanas or to open hospitals that served the Indian population. Though Kate does not represent one of these traditionally independent women in the colony, Steel’s representation of her presents readers with a more nuanced view of the colonial woman and challenges the stereotype portrayed in novels like Victoria Cross’s *Life of My Heart* (1915), E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924) and George Orwell’s *Burmese Days* (1934). In *On the Face of the Waters* Kate relinquishes her hegemonic values to survive and learns not only the colonizing power these values have over her and her body, but also the possible physical and ideological freedoms allowed through the practice of Hinduism.(4)

<4> Kate’s travel outside of the home culture allows her to experiment with her identity. Her character development contrasts the colonized female body with the autonomous woman when she experiences both the potentially repressive attitudes of Victorian femininity and the seeming freedom of Hinduism. At the beginning of the novel, Kate appears unhappy in her home, yet, at the same time, she continues to practice the dominant English ideologies of femininity and home culture. I define “home culture” as the intentionally created English domicile and the accompanying ideology this physical structure and its inhabitants reflect. Within this colonial culture women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of tradition embodying nationalism’s conservative principles of continuity (McClintock 359). Women’s bodies and the created house/home demonstrated the strength and continuity of an “authentic” English nationalism that was reflected in and augmented by the imperial project. This combination of the woman’s body, physical space of the house, and nationalist ideology serve as a metaphor for the English homeland, rationalizing the imperial project, or as Rosemary Marangoly George explains, for some, the home became the “sentimentalized and pure cultural center” (13). Colonial women developed the home culture in two ways. First, memsahibs used the “‘eternal feminine’ virtues of modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, [and] politeness” to reflect and reenact the ideal English woman (Gilbert and Gubar 23). Second, Anglo-Indian women built, decorated, organized, and then inhabited the ideal English house in India to complete the vision. Thus, a variety of physical items, including women’s bodies, represented the home culture: the soldiers’ and administrators’ houses maintained by “dutiful memsahibs,” the Club, carriages, food, and plants.(5) Home, for the colonists, was an identity-creating space. J. Douglas Porteous, in “Home: The Territorial Core” argues that

Home provides both the individual and the small primary group known as the family with all three territorial satisfactions [identity, security, stimulation]. These satisfactions derive from the control of physical space, and this control is secured by two major means. The personalization of space is an assertion of identity and a means of ensuring stimulation. (383)

In the colony, to personalize the space, to make the unfamiliar seem familiar, was an important duty for the memsahib. Moreover, for Anglo-Indians, the home culture reflected an English nationalism defined by colonial aspirations which could not be accomplished without Anglo-Indian women because “homes” were “relational nationalist constructs that require the deployment of women and female bodies” (Grewal 5). Without women, British colonists could not have homes. Thus, Anglo-Indian women enacted an irreplaceable duty to the Empire as both their bodies and the culture they represented fueled colonialism, reminding the men who governed of the Empire’s importance.

<5> When British women like Kate developed home culture in India, they were also forced to interact with the Indian landscape and people. Britons hired Indian servants, shopped in Indian markets, and fought the hot Indian sun that killed their delicate annual flowers. These markets, servants, and even the landscape itself are known as “contact zones.” Mary Louise Pratt defines “contact zone” as the “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (4). To establish or create a contact zone one must actively engage with the other culture — “meeting, clashing, and grappling;” it is not enough to simply be present in the zone. This interaction, according to Pratt, may be either positive or negative. Kate Erlton’s recognition of the cultural diversity that surrounds her and the options it affords her is a result of her ability to navigate the culturally-confused contact zone. Every time Kate interacts with Indians or Indian goods, she participates in the contact zone. The more active and willing Kate’s participation is, the more likely that she will mature as a non-colonized body because she looks (or is required to look) outside the home culture to different ways of living.

<6> According to Pratt, within the contact zone the subordinate group, usually colonial subjects, adopts goods from the dominant society. Rather than a linear interaction, the contact zone is distinctly non-linear, with goods, customs, and practices being exchanged, modified, and circulated. Ethnographers and anthropologists call this exchange “transculturation,” a process in which “marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture;” transculturation is necessarily “a phenomenon of the contact zone.” When the marginalized group adapts new material, it remains autonomous and chooses *how* to (re)present the dominating forces acting upon them (Pratt 6). Transculturation and interactions in the contact zone are nuanced processes that appear to benefit the dominant culture as the subordinates adapt outside culture; however, transculturation also allows the subordinate group to carefully choose what and how to represent the new culture. The marginalized group selects practices to ensure the continuation of their own culture while at the same time refigures the power of the dominant group. In essence, transculturation helps the subordinate culture survive and enter into a conversation with and even possible representative framing of the dominant group.

<7> Though Pratt defines transculturation as the marginalized group’s ability to adapt new materials, I suggest that if survival requires one to adopt new skills, the dominant group may also participate in transculturation because it must borrow these survival skills from the subordinate culture. In my revised definition of transculturation, adopted or adapted skills are not utilized to maintain political control over the subordinate group, but rather they are used to interact with the environment in a way that ensures safety and survival in a distinctly unfamiliar atmosphere. For instance, Kate adopts Indian customs to survive the Uprising, yet she does not gain any power

over the Indians, rather she relinquishes control by conceding similarities between the Indians and the Britons. I refer to dominant group transculturation as “situational transculturation.”

<8> While the most rudimentary outcome of situational transculturation is survival in a hostile environment, (i.e. Rudyard Kipling’s youthful Kim utilizes situational transculturation when he learns the language, dresses as an Indian, and befriends natives to survive the streets) once situational transculturation guarantees survival, a more ideologically important derivative is produced if the participant desires it. Because situational transculturation requires that the dominant group adopt new customs, habits, and languages, the colonizer develops a sense of self that is independent of nationalist expectations. If Pratt’s definition of transculturation allows subordinate groups to determine how they will represent and be represented by the dominant culture, the requisite synthesis of customs in situational transculturation provides the member of the dominant group alternatives to hegemonic ideals. Through reflection, the actor looks outside of the home culture, responding to or embracing new ideologies.

<9> Women in the colonies provide an interesting test case for situational transculturation, for they are part of both a dominant and subordinate culture. This positioning as a subordinate to British men and upper-class or high-caste Indians suggests that colonial women already practice transculturation to protect their identities, adopting masculine practices or attitudes and repositioning them in a way that best fits their needs. Their position as a dominant figure, especially in relation to their Indian servants, allows them to interact with the Indians’ repositioned or adopted British practices. In *On the Face of the Waters* rather than further adapt British customs to gain more control over her body, Kate turns to those of the Indians. Transculturation, in both Pratt’s original definition and my new definition, and the contact zone are not simplistic movements and adoptions of practices, but rather carefully calculated measures of one’s attitude and identity. If the home, as Porteous suggests, provides the individual with a sense of identity and security, then the decision to adopt foreign practices to ensure the home remains stable, requires the figure (whether a member of the dominant or subordinate group) with the responsibility to weigh those decisions carefully.

<10> Before we can examine Kate’s possible ideological disturbances, we must first observe how she reflects Victorian ideals of femininity. In the opening chapters of the novel, Steel outlines the careful construction of Kate’s home, the English flowers that she implores her Indian servant to water, and her religious pride in the “cult of home” (22-23). Despite the effort Kate puts into this home, the narrator also portrays Kate’s bitterness when she reflects on her husband, son, and colonial duty. The narrator explains that “All she [Kate] asked from fate was that the future might be no worse than the past; so that she could keep up the fiction to the end” (Steel 13). Kate is unhappy with her life. It is only a “fiction” that she must continue to “keep up” through good manners. Her recognition of this “fiction” assumes an awareness of the home culture’s futility.

<11> Kate, though she perceives the home culture as fictional, is ideologically and physically imprisoned. Readers first encounter Kate on her way to church when she meets her husband and his mistress at the King of Oude’s estate sale. Kate discovers that Major Erlton has just bought the King’s cockatoo. The King, however, did not actually own the bird, but rather, he had

borrowed it to teach the royal birds to recite prayers. Consequently, the original owner insists on the bird's return. Erlton places the cockatoo in Kate's carriage, and the owner rushes to her, imploring her to return the bird. Kate responds to the man by "unconsciously" huddling in the corner of her carriage trying to "escape from what she did not understand, and therefore did not like" (Steel 10). Kate's reaction and the space in which it took place – an English carriage – demonstrate a disconnect between Kate's life and that of the colonized. On the surface, Kate does not know what the man wants because she literally does not comprehend the language. She also does not *understand* the culture. Her inability to interpret the bird's owner stems from a desire to remain ignorant, revealed by her immediate dislike of anything unfamiliar. This ignorance is buoyed by the restrictions that colonial femininity places on her. Steel's depiction is historically accurate, for LeeAnne Richardson clarifies the experiences of colonial women explaining that "British men, in striving to protect 'their' women from Indian culture, confined women to the home" (86-87). Kate, as her husband's chattel, would have been "confined" to her home in most instances. Before the Uprising begins we only see Kate outside her house when she travels to church or to pay calls, acceptable and socially mandated activities. Kate's "attitude toward all things native" and her fear of the Indian, suggests she perceives Indian culture in the ways others want her to, as something from which she must be "protected."

<12> Kate's colonial encounter illustrates how British conventions restrict her. While in the carriage, Kate maintains an "innate repulsion of the alien," believing that all Indians are "[t]ied to hateful, horrible beliefs and customs, [and] unmentionable thoughts" (Steel 10). The decision that Indian thoughts are "unmentionable" demonstrates her incapacity to produce and articulate beliefs different from her own. The "thoughts" Kate cannot articulate are numerous. She may shun the man because he is not Christian, or she may believe that all Indian men "h[o]ld 'barbaric views about the female sex'" (Sinha 100). Additionally, she may question the man's performance of his masculinity; in *The Intimate Enemy*, Ashis Nandy explains that "manliness" was a particularly important way for Englishmen to set themselves apart from Indians; the lower-class soldiers displayed their "manliness" through virulent sexuality and upper- and middle-class men prided themselves on self-control and restraint (9). The effusive, emotional Indian lacks self-control which may cause Kate to see him as "horrible;" the perceived difference prevents her from empathizing with him. Moreover, her unconscious reaction represents the power of Victorian culture because she, like many other memsahibs, has been encouraged to think that Indians embody "horrible" thoughts.

<13> Not only does Kate's mental aversion to the man prevent her from interacting with him, but the home culture's walls also physically bind Kate as she hides in the carriage; this boundary illustrates the complicated position women hold in the colony. Kate is restricted to a specific space, the English carriage, representing the rise of "[g]ender-specific sexual sanctions [that] demarcated positions of power by re-fashioning middle-class conventions of respectability, which, in turn, prescribed the personal and public boundaries of race" (Stoler 345). When the carriage shelters Kate, it responds to British colonial demands of propriety because under the ideals of "middle-class conventions of respectability" she ought to remain sequestered. Even if she wanted to help the man or if she felt comfortable enough to leave the carriage, she would not because it would not be respectable to transgress the carefully constructed racial and gendered boundaries her carriage represents. As a dutiful memsahib whom others watch, Kate must act with dignity. Furthermore, because Kate is a white woman, the Indian man cannot enter

herspace as it would violate the culturally-inscribed racial divide between the Anglo-Indian woman colonizer and the male Indian colonized. The carriage represents the lack of interaction between the Anglo-Indian woman and the Indian man: the carriage walls protect the woman and exclude the Indian man from a privileged space. The carriage, like the home, is personal.

<14> The culturally prescribed interaction around the carriage ensures for Kate a “safe space,” but at the same time, it limits her autonomy. Stoler explains how women’s freedom was limited in the colony, arguing that “the very categories of ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’ were secured through forms of sexual control that defined the domestic arrangements of Europeans and the cultural investments by which they identified themselves” (Stoler 345). Kate is both a perpetrator and victim of “sexual control” and “cultural investment.” As a colonizer, she controls male and female Indian servants; she can choose whether to acknowledge Indians. Kate, at the same time, is also colonized. Though she is firmly situated in the middle of the contact zone, she both refuses to learn about the culture and is prohibited from relating to it. Even if Kate took it upon herself to disprove the stereotypes of “horrible” habits and customs, the Anglo-Indian community would shun her because “[c]ontrol of Englishwomen in the colonies was essential to the maintaining of European group integrity” (Grewal 73). Thus, as an embodiment of English nationalism, Kate feels it is her duty to the Empire to restrain herself.

<15> Though Kate seems firmly embedded as protectress of nationalism, her movement outside the home culture enables her survival and begins her transformation. After Indians attack the home she is visiting, Jim Douglas, a former soldier and current English army spy, rescues her. When he cannot return her to the cantonments, he moves her into the city, hiding her on a rooftop where she poses as an Afghani trader’s wife. While on the roof, she adopts Indian customs and participates in situational transculturation to avoid suspicion. Kate befriends her Indian maidservant Tara and learns Hindustani, and the longer that Kate remains in hiding, the more readily she relinquishes “[t]he burden of cultural authenticity” which ensured the successful (re)creation of England in the colony and reinforced the cult of home (Otuski 3). On a rooftop, with no memsahibs watching her, with no Anglo-Indian soldiers concerned about her interaction with Indians, Kate is no longer responsible for maintaining the oppressive home culture.

<16> Even though she moves out of the home culture, Kate does not immediately relinquish the compulsion to recreate England nor fully embrace India; she, in other words, works to make her new home comfortable. She wants to, in the words of Porteous, guarantee that her home provides her with stimulation, even if that personalization is dangerous. In the first days of her confinement, she takes only what she must (food and lodging) and adapts it to English standards. The narrator describes Kate’s housekeeping techniques, explaining that in her spare time “Kate took to amusing herself once more by making her corner of the East as much like the West as she dare. That was not much, but Jim Douglas’ eye noted the indescribable difference which the position of a reed stool, the presence of a poor bunch of flowers, the little row of books in a niche, made in the familiar surroundings” (Steel 294). In this situation, Kate’s actions seem impulsive and reckless; it seems as if she *must* make “the East like the West” for the rooftop to feel like “home.” Though Douglas recognizes that the westernization of the rooftop pleases Kate, he finds it bothersome and “resented it inwardly, telling himself once more that women were trivial creatures” (Steel 294). Kate begins to adapt, which fuels her survival, but she is still “too

trivial,” too English, for a man who has lived away from English conventions. Kate’s inability to relinquish the home culture emphasizes the ingrained nature of cultural colonization.

<17> Despite the prevalence of the home culture, Kate makes minor attempts at situational transculturation. These instances are far more important to her survival and freedom. Because she knows anything too English will endanger her, she uses Indian goods to create a home that aptly reflects “the highly ritualized social life of home (that is, English domestic culture)” that Douglas quickly recognizes (Otuski 2). While she still privileges the English over the Indian, she also begins to value Indian goods. Whether that value is for survival only or for more ideological reasons, Kate takes the step toward complete situational transculturation and shows that if forced to embrace Indian goods, she will. Kate’s meticulous organization of the roof is “indescribable” because she deftly uses the Indian materials to create “something obtrusively English” to English eyes (Steel 294). Small details – the placement of a stool, jasmine buds in water, organized books – show that it is an Anglo-Indian woman, and not an Indian, who keeps house. Yet, the items that Kate organizes are also distinctly Indian; she uses a reed stool rather than a wooden chair, jasmine buds instead of English annuals. Her willingness to use the Indian stool, flowers, and books to decorate the home shows she is ready to adapt Indian ideas and customs.

<18> Two motivating factors spur Kate’s transformation: the need to survive possible attacks from sepoys and a willingness to adapt instead of demand that Douglas risk both his own and her lives to immediately return her to an English cantonment. When Kate agrees to adapt to an Indian lifestyle, she illustrates the potential for greater transformation; she recognizes the present physical dangers, but also reflects “a new peace in her gray eyes” and believes the jasmine buds Tara brings are “like a new world to me – like a promise” (Steel 283). Both the peace and the promise are tied to distinctly Indian goods, and she seems eager to embrace the lifestyle to find a new world. The world the flowers promise her is not the one that keeps her “unconsciously” barricaded in a carriage, and it is not the world of the Uprising that rages below. Kate sees that the Uprising and her fight to survive promise her something better than the life she lived before, one that has more peace than the ignorant, fictional life she created in her colonial English home. She does not suspect this “peace” and “promise” is possible until she safely settles with allies, and thus we see that the survival aspect of situational transculturation always precedes the ability to look past the home culture. Though Kate initially seems reluctant to surrender her Englishness, the narrative illustrates the possibility of the final stages of situational transculturation and acknowledges memsahibs can move beyond the cultural control they employ as imperial mistresses.

<19> Kate’s rooftop home places her within a contact zone from which she cannot escape nor hide, unlike the carriage; she must actively participate. Her engagement guarantees her survival during the Uprising and the possibility that she may obtain personal growth from situational transculturation. She learns two important lessons about survival as an *Indian woman* in this contact zone: language and physical habits. The narrator explains that “the library consisted of grammars and vocabularies [for Hindustani] from which Kate learned with rapidity” (Steel 294). An indeterminate time later, after Douglas’s extended illness, he reluctantly indicates Kate’s fluency when he tells her that she has “learned everything my dear lady, necessary to salvation.

That's the worst of it! You chatter to Tara – I hear when you think I am asleep. You draw your veil over your face when the water-carrier comes to fill the pots as if you had been born on a housetop" (Steel 331). Douglas's comments serve a two-fold purpose: delight and disdain for her adaptive skills. Hindustani opens up avenues of communicating with Indians in their own language and guarantees Kate "salvation" because it increases her chances of passing as an Afghani woman. If Kate passes, she significantly improves Douglas's chances of removing her from the city. Thus, language, Hindustani especially, serves a primary function to ensure survival.

<20> Additionally, crossing the language barrier may also help her if she chooses to reflect on her situational transculturation. When she communicates with friendly Indians like Tara, Tara's brother Soma, Douglas's friend Tiddu, and Sri Anunda, she moves even further outside of her home culture and begins to understand why the Uprising occurred; she, in other words, begins to learn about that which she does not understand, that which is "foreign." Kate empathizes with Indian women, specifically Tara's desire to be suttee, and she gains a greater cultural awareness and cosmopolitan view of the world than she had barricaded in the carriage and her home. If the final stage of situational transculturation is an ideological move away from the home culture, it is necessary to understand the colonized's ideological bases, and language is an imperative instrument in that transition.

<21> Though Douglas praises Kate for her ability to adapt to the environment, he is also somewhat disdainful of her success, for it demonstrates that she has taken control of her life. Douglas's displeasure, confirmed by his exclamation "That's the worst of it," shows that integration in/with the contact zone disrupts traditional Victorian norms. For instance, Kate's new habit of pulling her veil over her face "like she was born on a rooftop" reveals a skill gained to ensure her survival, but it also shows Douglas that she has lost or willingly displaced English beliefs that would not require such actions. He reinforces his discomfort by telling her, "If I were not a helpless idiot I could pass you out of the city to-morrow, I believe. It isn't your fault any longer. It's mine" (Steel 331). For weeks, Douglas has been ill, and he believes that he ought to move Kate from the city. His comments require Kate's re-contextualization and return to traditional Victorian femininity to understand the injustice he feels in respect to what she sees as her own progression. The Victorian woman's "power is not for rule, not for battle, and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet orderings" of home (Ruskin 23). When Kate uses Indian goods to recreate her home, and when she learns the language, she surpasses the ideal use of her "intellect" to order. To adopt, to adapt, to "invent" is beyond Victorian femininity; these actions signify too much activity for what was Douglas believes is a traditionally passive feminine body, and Douglas sees her proactiveness as threatening to his masculinity. In other words, Kate's body and what she does with it challenge Douglas's power, including his ability to protect her.

<22> Douglas's attitude also matches well with initial reports of the Uprising and later constructed narratives "of British women as helpless victims of Mutiny violence" (Procida 111). Because he is ill, Douglas "is in the position Kate had been in, waiting for care, unsure of what is happening around him, and unable to effect any change in the outcome...and he is offended" by Kate's new found ability to protect herself (Richardson 102). Douglas recognizes that he is no

longer responsible for Kate's safety because she can and does take control of her own life. She is no longer a "helpless victim" who needs his protection; instead Douglas feels "helpless" when Kate becomes an active subject.<sup>(6)</sup> She finds confidence in her new skills; she gains power, freedom from masculine control that she cannot possess in the home culture. Even though he initially demanded that Kate adopt Indian habits to ensure her safety, Douglas finds it difficult to play the role of the feminine, passive object rather than masculine, active subject, especially when a "dutiful memsahib" becomes powerful and independent enough to survive on her own. Though Kate's situational transculturation is a slow process, when she is contrasted with the restrained and hegemonic desires of another English person, the distance between her original beliefs and her new cultural actions are apparent.

<23> Through two public performances of Indian femininity, dressing as an Indian ayah before Douglas rescues her, and meditating as a penitent wife during the siege, Kate demonstrates how the adoption of foreign customs enables her survival and provokes greater reflection about British culture. Complete immersion in the contact zone, public performances, and the surety of survival encourage her to reflect on her journey and look at life in new ways; movement out of the home culture and into the foreign public sphere completes Kate's situational transculturation. Moreover, situational transculturation, and its emphasis on survival, differs from the original definitions of transculturation, for Kate must completely adopt Indian customs while colonized people like Indians do not necessarily completely adopt the colonizers' customs. Instead, Indians and other colonized populations adapt customs to meet their needs and the original indigenous cultural values may still be apparent. In contrast, Kate relinquishes all ties to, habits, and mannerisms of the English community to successfully escape notice by Indian soldiers. These acts situate her in the public sphere, the traditional realm of English masculinity, yet in the guise of an Indian woman, a necessarily subordinate body in the colony. Kate's travels through the Indian public sphere help her recognize not only the restraint Victorian conventions place on her but also the dangers of English masculinity.

<24> Kate discovers the freedom of an Indian woman early in the siege when she tries to escape the occupied cantonment dressed as an ayah. She recognizes the safety that veils provide women and contrasts these ideals with her experience in England, realizing that she would be in greater danger in England than in a cantonment under attack in the colony. As she creeps into the dark night, "she caught it [a horse blanket] up and paused deliberately in the darkest corner of the square, to slip off shoes and stockings, petticoats and bodice; so, in the scantiest of costumes, winding the long blanket round her, as a skirt and veil in ayah's fashion" (Steel 168). Though frightened by the possibility of attack, Kate realizes that her position as an *Indian* woman affords her respect that she would not be granted in England; she

remember[s] to her comfort that it was not England where a lonely woman might be challenged all the more for her loneliness. In this heathen land, that down-dropped veil hedged even a poor grass-cutter's wife about with respect. What is more, even if she were challenged, her proper course would be to be silent and hurry on. (Steel 168)

Kate's recognition of India as a "heathen land" demonstrates that she is not fully acculturated to Indian customs: India is still unknown and she maintains the dominant ideology that Indians are

distinctly un-Western. At the same time, though, Kate recognizes the safety that her femininity affords her. Instead of finding English ideals of masculinity to represent a protective barrier, as hegemonic attitudes encourage, Kate recognizes the danger that English men pose to single women. The safety that Kate finds dressed as an Indian woman shows her that the home culture is more dangerous to women than is Indian culture. To adopt traditional Indian customs, to participate in situational transculturation, is the best way to survive.

<25> Kate comes to a similar realization about the privacy afforded to Indian women when she serves penance at the ashram. This final and most complete instance of situational transculturation demonstrates first, her fear and desire to survive, and second, her active participation in the contact zone when she “grapples” with Hindu beliefs before adopting them. While she sits outside her hut in the ashram, Kate’s “heart beat at each step on the walk behind her, but she soon realized that she was hidden by her vow, hopped about from the possibility of intrusion by her penance” (Steel 403). Kate is at first afraid of her presence in the colonial public sphere. Her English instincts tell her that the colony is dangerous for women and they should remain in the home culture. These same instincts cause reactions like huddling in carriage corners, fear of foreignness, and the reluctance to learn about India. Yet, when Kate remembers that as an Indian woman she will not be treated the same way as an English woman would, she recognizes the difference between colonial and English conceptions of femininity. Though nineteenth-century critics found many Indian practices such as child marriage, suttee, the seclusion of women in zenanas, and low female education rates to be immoral, the general safety afforded to Indian women made India seem less dangerous to Kate than Britain.(7)

<26> Kate takes full advantage of the opportunity to learn about the Indians around her, and she reflects upon her situational transculturation as she meditates at the ashram. Even though Tara houses Kate at the ashram to keep her safe, Kate learns more from her penance than any of her other experiences. For example, at the beginning of Kate’s penance, Tara suggests that Douglas may have forgotten about her and may not return to rescue her; thus, she will have to escape with the help of her Indian friends and her own ingenuity. Kate’s reaction to Tara’s explanation is surprising, however. Rather than being excited about returning to her family or upset that Douglas may not come back, Kate finds that “this uncertainty about all things ... had ceased to disturb her peace” (Steel 404). Much like the “peace” and “promise” of a new world that Kate felt on the rooftop, she recognizes that returning to the cantonment may not be the best thing for her. She is at “peace” with her new world, with the role she plays, and she finds that she is no longer confined by the carriage, house, or cultural walls that encouraged her fear and ignorance.

<27> Furthermore, Kate’s initial adaptations to Indian life were undertaken to guarantee her survival so that she could return to the home culture where she would continue to perpetuate and embody English nationalism. Her meditations, however, make her realize that

[s]he was losing hold of life. ... Yes! she was losing her grip on this world without gaining, without even desiring, a hold on the next. She was learning a strange new fellowship with the dream of which she was a part, because it would soon be past; because the flowers, the birds, the beasts, were mortal as herself. (Steel 412)

Though Steel's descriptions of Hinduism are cursory, she imbues Kate with some sense of a continuity of life and death and the relationship among all creation. While Kate's "dutiful memsahib" pre-situational transculturation self was concerned with perpetuating English culture, her ability to "lose her grip on life" demonstrates the ability to move past these responsibilities. Kate's thoughts are no longer about survival but rather on the lives of those around her, plants, animals, Indians. She recognizes that everything is interconnected and equal through its mortality; this equality is extended to Tara, Soma, Tiddu, Sri Anunda, and other Indians. Just like the Indians, the English too are mortal. Though Hindu beliefs are different from English conceptions of life and death, Kate no longer considers them horrible. The colonizer/colonized dichotomy held at the beginning of the novel disappears, and Kate sees herself as part of the "Great Wheel of Life."

<28> If colonizers experiencing situational transculturation move from the desire to survive to the desire to approach the world through a different mindset, then Kate's ability to find peace within herself and conceptualize "immortality through mortality" allows her to escape Delhi with this new viewpoint intact (Steel 413). Kate's new understanding of the world, and her reluctance to return to the home culture is evidenced when she returns to the cantonment saying, "I feel as if I had just been born...In truth, she was wondering if that spinning of the Great Wheel toward Life again brought with it this forlornness, this familiarity" (Steel 419). Kate's reluctance to return to English society is revealed in the "forlornness" caused by rebirth. At the ashram, she was happy to "lose her grip on this world" and move towards death, for that death freed her.

When she returns to the camp, she is "reborn" into the home culture. This birth, rather than being reproductive or reinvigorating, brings despair. To return to the home culture is to return to the restrictions and the expectations that she will (re)build English society in the colony and act against those she has befriended. When she feels "forlorn" about returning to English life, she demonstrates that her journeys changed her. She has matured, found personal agency, and looked past the home culture to a different, more approachable "promise." It is not surprising that though she has not had freedom of movement in Delhi, her situational transculturation has produced freedom of thought, expression, and self-exploration because her experiences were vastly different than previous experiences. In her efforts to survive, she learns about Hinduism; she finds alternatives; she possesses freedom of thought that the home culture cannot, or refuses to, provide for her. To return to English society, to be "reborn," is to move closer to the repression and stagnation that the home culture represents to the memsahib.

<29> Steel's narrative demonstrates that though survival is the driving force behind situational transculturation, reflection on the experience can have far-reaching effects on the traveler's sense of self and blind allegiance to the colonial community. Moreover, Steel devises a distinctly gendered approach to the transculturation, for even in Jim Douglas, a man who must act like an Indian to survive as a spy, we do not see the changes in his relationship to the world at large that we do in Kate. Women, especially those in both a position of authority and subordination, like Anglo-Indians, understand and react to the process of situational transculturation in a way that may allow for greater permanent adoption of new cultural values.

<30> To encourage this transformation, Steel illustrates "both the ruinous effects of an uncritical acceptance of social formulations and the potential psychic liberation that cultural awareness can

provide” (Bauer 75). At the beginning of the novel, when Kate refuses to engage the contact zone, to “grapple” with Indian customs, to acknowledge the Indian man, to learn Hindustani, she is physically and ideologically trapped. Yet when Kate moves into the contact zone under duress, dresses like an Indian woman, befriends Indians, learns the language, and adopts customs, she discovers that “native knowledge systems [are] a means of better understanding the self, the world, and others” (Richardson 95). Kate’s “native knowledge” allows her not only to survive the Uprising, but she also begins to understand the violence and motivation behind the events surrounding her and her place in English society. She becomes a woman who is free from the world, from her husband, and from social conventions.

<31> Transculturation, in its original definition, helps to guarantee the survival of subordinate cultures through the adoption and appropriation of materials from the dominant culture. Much in the same vein, fully-formed and implemented situational transculturation encourages a reassessment and rebuilding of the Self, which also may be subordinated by the dominant culture. In *On the Face of the Waters*, Kate’s struggle to survive forces her to adopt Indian goods and customs, and rather than turning back to the home culture, she reflects on her experiences, recognizes herself as a subordinate figure in the colonial atmosphere, and embraces Hindu ideologies to help her combat her own subordination. Through Kate’s discovered freedom, Steel’s narrative demonstrates the power of active participation in the contact zone to free women from Victorian mores.

#### Endnotes

(1) Though widely popular at the beginning of the twentieth century, Flora Annie Steel and other Anglo-Indian women authors like Alice Perrin, Bithia Mary Croker and Maud Diver have largely been ignored by scholars. Critics, until recently, looked instead to canonical, male figures like Rudyard Kipling and E.M. Forster for literary representations of colonial India. For recent scholarship on Steel and other Anglo-Indian women see Melissa Edmondson’s “Bithia Mary Croker and the Ghosts of India” *CEA Critic* 72.2 (Winter 2010): 92-112; Jenny Sharpe’s *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993; Helen Bauer Pike’s “Reconstructing the Colonial Woman: Gender, Race, and the Memsahib in Flora Annie Steel’s *On the Face of the Waters*.” *Nineteenth Century Feminisms* 6 (Fall/Winter 2002): 74-86; Nancy Paxton’s “Mobilizing Chivalry: Rape in Flora Annie Steel’s *On the Face of the Waters* and Other British Novels about the Indian Uprising of 1857.” *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction*. Eds. Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer. New York: Garland, 1996. 247-275.(^)

(2) Kate’s struggle and survival during the siege at Delhi provides readers with a unique representation of British women during the Uprisings. Despite the numerous travel narratives written by women who survived the Uprisings, like Adelaide Case’s *Day by Day at Lucknow* (1858) and R.M. Cooper’s *A Lady’s Escape from Gwalior and Life in the Fort of Agra during the Mutinies of 1857* (1859), many late-Victorians saw women only as helpless victims of the

Uprisings. For many readers, the predominant Uprising story to include women and children was one which narrated the murder and burial of “innocents” in Cawnpore at the hands of Nana Sahib.(^)

(3)This “home culture” is both literal and metaphorical. On the one hand, Kate’s survival requires her literally to leave her house—a space that should be considered “safe.” On the other hand, she also leaves the English or British culture of the “homeland” by practicing Hinduism. She relinquishes both her sense of space and place and her English identity to at first, survive the Uprising and then, to find her own identity apart from her unfaithful husband.(^)

(4)See LeeAnne Richardson’s *New Woman and Colonial Adventure Fiction in Victorian Britain: Gender, Genre, and Empire* and Nancy Paxton’s “Mobilizing Chivalry: Rape in Flora Annie Steel’s *On the Face of the Waters* and Other British Novels about the Indian Uprising of 1857.” Richardson explains that even though Steel’s novel is set in 1857, “many of Steel’s women characters are like New Women: independent, rebellious, critical of prevailing gender and sexual codes (although, since the novel is set in 1859 [sic], they are not so named)” (79). These New Woman traits make Steel’s women interesting investigations of late-Victorian feminism. Paxton similarly suggests that Steel’s novel “reflects many of the new ideological tensions in colonial discourse of the 1890s” rather than the possible feminist ideals of mid-century (266). Steel’s depictions of Britons’ attitudes toward Indian men as dangerous to women were fueled by the stories of rape and murder from the Uprising itself. Steel’s familiarity with the Uprising stories colors her depictions of Kate Erlton’s reaction to Indian men.(^)

(5)Rebecca Saunders defines a “dutiful memsahib” as a woman who “stood for restraint that had to be imposed on themselves and their men in the form of rigid social behavior” to ensure the success of the colonial project, whose “home is an exact replica of an English home,” and one who inspires a “protective attitude toward women” from the English men in the colony (305, 311-312). This woman was a “popular target for critics of empire” (Saunders 304). Jennifer Otuski explains that “from the native perspective, the *memsahibs* symbolized the entire network of colonial oppression, the privileged vehicles through which the native’s daily social subjugation and humiliation were to be achieved” (4). Looking back to narrative representations of the colonial memsahib demonstrates the power that they possessed in the colony, these women controlled other memsahibs (as Mrs. Turton and Mrs. Burton have over Adela in *A Passage to India*) to guarantee consistency in the replications of England and Indian servants.(^)

(6)Kate’s active subjectivity is confirmed when she successfully escapes the city and rows to the nearest safe cantonment by herself.(^)

(7)LeeAnne Richardson shows the similarities between purdah women and Anglo-Indians. She explains that “[i]ronically, British women were in their own kind of zenana, secluded from Indian society, shuttled off to hill stations in hot weather, barred from mixing in general Indian society” (86). Richardson sees the seclusion of Anglo-Indian women just as detrimental to health, freedom, and mental ingenuity as the experiences of the Indian women.(^)

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