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II

SERVANTS IN LITERARY AND PUBLIC WORLDS

5 Representing Servant Lives in the Household and Beyond

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Domestic servants have been ubiquitous in the modern Hindi literary corpus. Their representation, however, is contingent upon inhabiting the domestic world of the master and less on their own. This is because, until the 1990s, writers—although far from homogeneous in their approach—have invariably belonged to the class of masters. The story of servants' lives, if not central, has been intermeshed with their masters' subjectivity. Literary representations nonetheless capture the lives of domestic servants with richness and complexity, albeit they remain ostensibly inflected with their masters' moral and ideological concerns. The changing moral-political climate in history brings palpable shifts in such representations, along with nondescript continuities. We shall therefore examine the politics, poetics and history of servants' representation across several genres and over a relatively long period, between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

We shall briefly touch upon the self-styled reformist educational manuals of the nineteenth century and highlight some aspects of the discursive formulation of the master–servant relationship. We shall then juxtapose and discuss the figure of domestic servant in selected early Hindi novels, a new literary genre which, amongst other things, brought the household (and its constituents, including servants) to the centre of literary–political imagination in late nineteenth-century colonial India. We shall examine the similarities and/or differences between the

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two literary representations, without overlooking their complicated interconnections with questions of domesticity and nationalism. Next, we shall explore visual and literary representations of the domestic servant between the 1920s and 1930s. Along with cartoons, which arguably aimed at reforming and entertaining readers, we shall also deal with some short stories and sketches which self-consciously endeavoured to represent these subaltern social characters and their predicament during the high tide of anti-colonial nationalism. In doing so, we shall tease out the shifts and continuities in the language and politics of representation of the servant in late colonial times.

GRAMMAR OF THE MISTRESS–MAID RELATIONSHIP

Out of countless literary, religious, social and didactic Hindi print production in the late nineteenth century, educational tracts were an important genre. Patronised and promoted by government and communitarian institutions, they aimed to train and educate young men and women in a variety of new subjects and skills. Many of these tracts keep in mind the age, sex, class and gender of the students/readers. Let us examine one such book intended to teach the art of letter-writing to women: *Striyon kī Hitopatrikā arthāt Hindī me Khat-Patra ādi Sikhāne kī Pustak* (A Compendium for the Benefit of Women or a Guidebook for Teaching Letter-Writing), published in 1873 by Naval Kishore Press, Lucknow (Figure 5.1). The book contains specimens of women's letters written to and received from various kin, relatives and domestic servants. It focuses on the skill of language, on format and manner of addressing. The content of the letters makes it quite obvious that this book shares the ideological and pedagogic agenda of contemporary reformist literature which sought to define new gender roles, duties and responsibilities. As many historians have argued after Partha Chatterjee's seminal essay in *Recasting Women*, the middle-class, high- (and also intermediary) caste nationalist/reformist discourse in the late nineteenth century put a premium on the 'autonomous' inner domain of 'home' against the outer world marked by colonial subjugation. It sought to fashion a new image of womanhood, domesticity, respectability, and so forth, which were

crucial to the self-fashioning of the middle class and its articulation of Indian nationalism.[1] Extending this line of argument, some scholars have expounded that since the servants, along with family women, were integral to the imagination of a household, the idea of the domestic servant too was redefined.[2] Clearly, this letter-writing manual embodies similar ideological imperatives. It underlines the significance of the domestic servant within such a nationalist imagination of home. This is reflected in the fact that of the total fifty-eight letters featured, five show communication between (female) servant and mistress.[3] It is postulated that not only the ladies of the household, but also the servants should be educated and made the bearers of the reformist pedagogy.

[1] Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women Question', in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 233–53. For a critical use of Chatterjee's formulation, see Tanika Sarkar, 'The Hindu Wife and the Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal', *Studies in History* 8, no. 2, 1992, 213–35.

[2] Swapna Banerjee emphasises that servants were crucial in refashioning of the middle-class self. Swapna M. Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domestics: Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Charu Gupta has shown that the image of ideal wife-woman in Hindu middle-class discourse was constructed vis-à-vis the women of lower-caste/class service providers such as *chamarin*, *kaharin* and *paniharin*. See Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2016), chs 1, 2. With largely similar source material but by highlighting the servant characters, Charu Gupta's latest work deals with Hindu middle-class anxieties in relation to Muslim and Dalit servants. See Charu Gupta, 'Domestic Anxieties, Recalcitrant Intimacies: Representation of Servants in Hindi Print Culture of Colonial India', *Studies in History* 34, no. 2, 2018, 141–63. Moreover, we can extend Banerjee's and Gupta's arguments: such literature also sought to redefine the morality, manners and duties (but not rights) of servants.

[3] This tract itself was apparently translated from Urdu. The booklet belongs to the early/formative period of Hindi prose, when the modern *khari boli* and its grammar were not yet standardised. Hence, it contains a lot of variation from today's standard, not only in spelling, punctuation and gender, but also in terms of grammatical, linguistic and idiomatic usage. For instance, a big house or mansion is termed in Sanskritised idiom as *pratiṣṭhān* in the titles of the letters, but is called *kothī*/*havelī* in the letters' content. The common noun for female domestics is *naukar* not *naukarani*, but their principle verbs are gendered. Paṇḍit Shiv Nārāyaṇ, *Striyon kī hitopatrikā arthāt hindī me khat-patra ādi sikhāne kī pustak* (A Compendium for the Benefit of Women or a Guidebook for Teaching Letter-Writing) (Lucknow: Naval Kishore Press, 1873), 118–24.

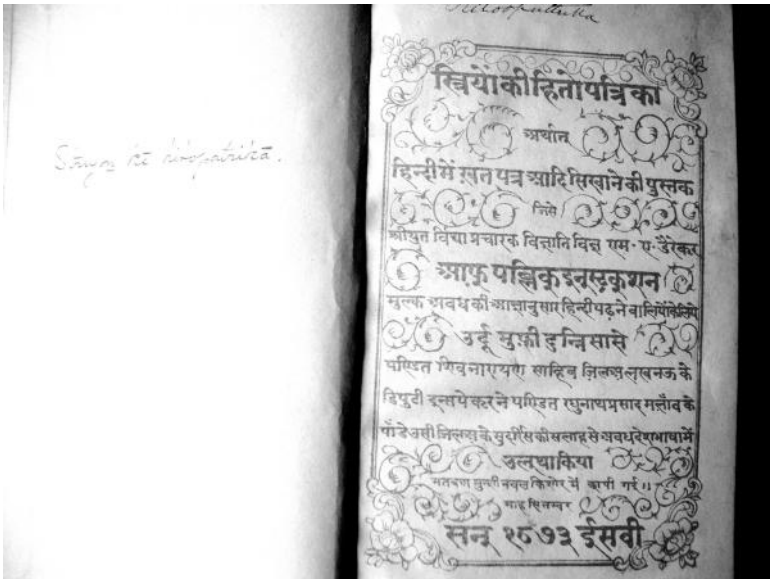

Figure 5.1 Cover page of *Striyon kī hitopatrikā arthāt hindī me khat-patra ādi sikhāne kī pustak* [A Compendium for the Benefit of Women or a Guidebook for Teaching Letter-Writing] (1873)

If we move beyond the frames set by these otherwise important studies, which look at the household as the site of recasting the middle-class self, patriarchy and nationalism, such pedagogic literature also provides further insights into another social relation and its hierarchy in the same domestic world. Deep in the framework of 'the nation and its women', there existed another relationship of domination and subalternity between the goddess of the pantheon known as 'the home' and her servants, ideally female. The manual contains educative/model letters. They are very much designed for hypothetical situations and are meant to be largely impersonal. These letters, it can be reasonably inferred, seek to outline a grammar of mistress–maid relations.

The content of the letters suggests that a mistress must verify a domestic servant's character and record of service before employing him/her in the household. It is indirectly recommended that the servant's wage (preferably in cash) be fixed before hiring. It is also alluded to that for effective control

and ensuring their disciplined conduct, there should be some sort of service rules set out to govern the servants, with regard to the likes of granting leave before their visiting home, being punctual about returning to work after stipulated leave, and so forth. The mistress, in turn, is expected to ensure that the servants are performing their duties diligently.

Moreover, the servant-letters are notable for their language and mannerisms. The relationship between the servant and the mistress is broadly delineated in the standard language of class distinction. The letters imply that the lady of the house should master the language of command and perform her superiority in her everyday gestures, mode of address and manner of speech; the maid must embody the gestures of submission and obedience.

In the formulation of this didactic text, the category of mistress is homogeneous; she is a generic wife-woman of the rich household living in a mansion. But the class of servants is marked by hierarchy and differentiation. Servants are of different ranks/ages, as senior or junior servant/maid. The senior maid is an elderly woman. She is the personal attendant of the mistress, thus symbolising not only her seniority in age but also a greater access to the physical and emotional world of the mistress in comparison to other maids. Next in rank is any other maid or junior maid who assists in household chores. There is a subtle but clear difference in the lady's mode of address to her variously ranked servants. While senior maid is addressed by proper name with a respectable suffix (*jī*), the other maids are not. However, masterly authority and the tone of the language in the lady's letters remain undiluted in her address to both categories of servants. While the lady speaks of a servant as *naukar*, the maids describe themselves as *dāsī* or *lauṇḍī* (indicating a more slave-like status) of their mistress. The mistress herself is referred to by maids as *sarkar* (a word that means 'government' in a political context, and here symbolises 'mistress' in a particular form of patronage and dependence).

The model letters are generally silent on the caste status of the maids, yet there are hints. The name of the senior maid, for instance, is Rukmini. Conventionally, such a chaste Sanskrit name would appear to be that of an upper-caste woman. In another instance, requirement of a *bārin* (lower-caste woman) servant as junior maid is expressed in one of the letters. Steeped in reformist pedagogy of the late nineteenth century, these

imaginary letters imply that a rich upper-caste Hindu home is governed by the wife-woman of the household. Although subordinate to her man, she is expected to rule over and control a band of honest, hardworking and obedient servants (preferably women of any caste). The language and grammar of the mistress–maid relationship are to be guided by a normative code of hierarchy, marked by an impersonal tone and devoid of personal affect.

Let us juxtapose this educational manual and some early Hindi novels. Servants are important in the narratives of novels of the late nineteenth century. *Parīkśā Gurū*, arguably the first Hindi novel set in the Indian merchant milieu of Delhi, has been studied by various scholars but none of these works have looked at the master–servant relationship therein.[4] One of the weaknesses of the protagonist in *Parīkśā Gurū*, the reader is told, is that he does not know how to control or deal with his army of servants. The master does not maintain a ledger-account of the servants, noting their stipulated salary and how much they have actually received. On the contrary, he keeps them more like a feudal aristocrat; the servants also behave more like his retainers and hangers-on than as hired workers.[5] For instance, there are male domestic workers, who, although only marginally present in the story, demand large sums of money beyond their stipulated salary, as personal favours. They expect the master to help them with the marriage expenses of their children, as if he was a family patriarch and they were his kin. The master's attachment to the servants is far from ideal—it overtops the boundaries of the impersonal, rational and professional.

[4] A. S. Kalsi, 'Parīkśāguru (1882): The First Hindi Novel and the Hindu Elite', *Modern Asian Studies* 26, no. 4, 1992, 763–90; Vasudha Dalmia, 'A Novel Moment in Hindi: Pariksha Guru or the Tutelage of Trial', in *Narrative Strategies: Essays on South Asian Literature and Films*, ed. Vasudha Dalmia and Theo Damsteegt (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 169–84. The novel was first published in 1882. I have used the reprint. Lālā Śrinivās Dās, *Parīkśā Gurū* [Tutelage of Trial] (Ilāhābād: Kitāb Mahal, 2014).

[5] Although leading servant characters are not domestic servants but mainly *munshi*s, salesmen, etc., who assist in the master's business enterprise, the discussion shares the same grammar. When trouble visits the master and his business enterprise because of his spendthrift nature, social indulgence, inadequate maintenance of the records of trade transactions, inculcation of the vices of the old aristocracy and, more importantly, due to corrupt dealings of his munshis and salesmen, all servants, including domestic servants, start taking advantage of the situation.

Consequently, when a crisis visits the master, the servants trouble him even more and finally desert him. It is none other than the master, therefore, who is said to be responsible for the wicked behaviour of servants, for he does not abide by the codes of the master–servant relationship to begin with.

In sum, as with the educative manual discussed above, the novel, which arguably seeks to advocate a new or modern mercantile ethos against the old or traditional aristocratic culture of business and entrepreneurship, also pitches for a 'modern' way of keeping servants; that is, hired servants need to be impersonally regulated. Successful command relies not on liberties accorded to them (as it used to be in case of generationally bonded dependents) but, on the contrary, on maintaining a formal and impersonal relationship. Ironically, the master is the one who behaves more in the framework of 'cultural continuity'. He is unable to differentiate between a hired servant and a dependent domestic resident.

Like the letters above, *Parīkśā Gurū* also deals with the question of master–servant relations in exemplary and normative terms. The domestic worker as a person remains largely generic; he is an undeveloped, stock character in the novel. Furthermore, he is shown neither as interacting with the household women nor as having access to the women's quarters. In just one instance, the *baḍī dāi* (senior maid) is introduced to the reader and the mistress–maid relationship is thinly sketched. Dāi, we are told, was under the tutelage of the lady of the house, who is a model Hindu wife-woman. Since the lady of the house cannot go out of the precinct and meet other men, dāi performs her tasks. She goes out and speaks on her lady's behalf as her messenger. Baḍī dāi, in fact, is an interesting category of maidservant, who is conspicuous by her presence in early Hindi novels. In the next section we shall discuss the figure of baḍī dāi with reference to a late nineteenth-century novel which is unique for her elaborate characterisation therein. Her character is not only important for the novel's narrative strategy, it is also distinct in the ways it advocates for a mistress–maid relationship based on the culture of kin-like bonds and affective care. Dāi's character, in fact, adds an interesting and perhaps unsettling dimension to the normative binary of home and the world on which the novel's narrative is structured. The wife-woman was far from adequately equipped to run the everyday business along the lines of the idea of the 'autonomous' domain of a middle-class home. Her agency

was dependent on a quintessential outsider: the maidservant. Hence, the maid–mistress relationship, as we shall see, acquired a different valency in early novels than the one between a male servant and his master.

SERVANT AS SUPPLEMENT

Bhuvaneshvar Mishra's *Balvant Bhumihār* (1896), set in a zamindari household of north Bihar, is one such novel that stands out in this regard.[6] The figure of baḍī dāi is important not only from the point of view of her elaborate presence but also in terms of narrative structure. Before we discuss the figure of baḍī dāi, a brief comment on the historical context of the novel is in order.

Mishra's two novels, *Gharāu Ghatnā* (1893) and *Balvant Bhumihār* (1896), can be read as a nationalist literary response to the historic Age of Consent bill controversy. The nationalist outrage and consequent public controversy around the bill primarily questioned the authority of a foreign power to legislate laws that arguably belonged to the sovereign domain of the home/nation. Mishra's novels deal with this question in a unique way. They idealise a Hindu conjugality marked by perfectly matched courtship of adults, denying the existence of child marriage and pre-puberty consummation, and lauding the rituals and customs of marriage itself—thereby making the question of reform and legislation appear redundant.[7] Mishra, thus, creatively responds to the alleged problems in the

[6] Before going to Calcutta to get a law degree from Ripon College, Bhuvaneshvar Mishra (b. 1867) had worked as employee of the zamindari estate of Betia Raj and run the periodical *Camparaṇ Caṃdrikā* . During his stay in Calcutta in the 1890s, he worked as an editor of *Hindī Bangabāsī*, published by the Bangabasi Press, which was at the forefront of agitation against the Age of Consent Bill. After his Calcutta sojourn, he settled in Darbhanga and practised law in the lower court. Bhuvneśvar Miśra, *Balvant Bhumihār* (Dillī: Vidyā Vihār, 2005, reprint).

[7] Mishra's first novel *Gharāu Ghatnā* (1893) was first serialised in *Hindī Bangabāsī* (February–April 1893) and then published in 1893 by Naval Kishore Press, Lucknow. *Gharāu Ghatnā* (literally, 'Household Events') is a celebratory public account of the inner domain: the household. It tells the story (like modern soap operas) of the thrilling experience of an arranged marriage of a literate adult couple of the same upper-caste Hindu family. It mentions the system of early/child marriage but insinuates that consummation takes place much after the age of consent is reached. The (second)

institution of Hindu marriage within the standard nationalist ideological frame of home/world in both novels. However, in the domain of home, the maidservant moves along the plot. Let us summarise it.

Balvant Bhumihār is built around the question of marriage between a man and woman hailing from rival landed Bhumihar families of Muzaffarpur (Tirhut district). They see each other at a Hindu temple when the girl comes to worship (in baḍī dāi's company) and her eyes meet those of a well-built, handsome young man immersed in his prayer. The boy, Balvant, palpably innocent of zamindari tricks and manoeuvrings (*dav-peṃc*), happens to be on the run from the girl's father, Ranpal Singh, who, as is typical of the litigant caste of Bhumihars, has planned to get him arrested on jumped-up charges and then usurp his zamindari property.[8] After a lot of dramatic twists and turns, thanks to the secret but critical role played by baḍī dāi, the long family rivalry ends with patriarchal consent for the boy to marry the girl, and everybody lives happily ever after.

Coming to the figure of baḍī dāi: she is a 45-year-old, literate, dark-skinned, lower-caste maidservant, who knows more than anyone else in the family about the household and its open and dark secrets. Her name is Shukni, 'the one born on Friday', but she is not known or called by her proper name in the narrative. She does not have her own home and considers herself a member of the zamindar's household. She is also a second-generation maid. Her mother, Chanchaliya, had earned the position of baḍī dāi and was a surrogate of the sarkar in the household a generation earlier. Chanchaliya kept the place orderly, for the lady of the household at that time was weak and indifferent to the management of her own world. Chanchaliya had de facto authority in the home; no

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arrival of the bride in the groom's house (*gaunā* or *dvirāgaman*) takes place when the couple are in their twenties. The novel celebrates the romance of conjugal love amidst detailed description of rituals, women's songs and culture during marriage and long drawn-out post-marriage festivities in an unspecified north Indian small town/*qasba*.

[8] Ranpal was apparently taking revenge on Balvant for the alleged fault of the latter's father, who manipulatively took land from the former's innocent father. Amongst other things, the novel also reflects on the culture of litigation, feud and excess prevalent in rural society, especially amongst the dominant caste of Bhumihars. Apparently, the zamindars of Muzaffarpur were so scandalised by this depiction that they bought all the copies of the novel they could and destroyed them. See Rāmnirañjan Parimalendu's preface to the 2005 reprint. Miśrā, *Balvant Bhumihār*, 8.

decisions were finalised without her consent. When the new bride (Sukni's mistress) came to the house, Chanchaliya mentored her like a mother-in-law. After she retired gracefully in her old age, the baton was passed to her own daughter. Sukni was born and raised in the same house. She acquired moral virtues, skills and intelligence from her mother and earned the same position after her death. She also nursed the babies of her mistress, who was of similar age as herself. Although she has her own family—a husband and a son who work as the zamindars' retainers—her identity as baḍī dāi is more important in the narrative of the novel.

Baḍī dāi is present throughout. In the opening scene at the temple, when the girl, Yamuna, sees a young man (Balvant) sitting next to the idol and hesitates to go close for prayer, dāi exhorts her not to be wary of a male stranger when in her protective presence. While running away from the retainers of his rival zamindar, the boy ends up in hiding in the house of the same girl and faints due to exertion. Baḍī dāi identifies him and locks him in. She examines the character of this boy in trouble and discerns that he is pure and proud. She then scrutinises the character of Yamuna like a strict mother, lest she bring bad name to her family by indulging in a love affair. Yamuna's pleading convinces her that she is a chaste and pure girl, but baḍī dāi anticipates a strange emotion (love at first sight) in her. She realises that Balvant is actually a nice zamindar boy who will be a fit match, but the lord himself is after his life and property.[9] With the noble ultimate intention of fixing the wedding of Yamuna and Balvant, she starts manoeuvring and convincing all members of the family on the grounds of morality and pragmatism.[10] She uses her trust and proximity to the sarkar

[9] In another twist in the tale, Balvant is transported to another place with the help of Yamuna's mother (sarkar). Baḍī dāi happens to read a note written by her brother (Rampadarath Singh) to the lady; she quickly fathoms that he is being taken to Yamuna's maternal uncle (Rampadarath Singh). While the lady of the household does not know about Balvant, baḍī dāi finds out who he is. Balvant is running away from her master, Yamuna's father, and Yamuna's maternal uncle helps him for altogether different reasons.

[10] For instance, in conversation with diwan, the manager of the estate, she blurts out that Balvant Singh has been unjustly harassed for no fault of his own. If Balvant's father had been a victorious litigant against her master's ancestors, it was not his fault. It is insinuated that Balvant is an innocent, proud and able-bodied intelligent man. He is one of the most eligible bachelors in the locality. He instead should be won over to the master's side.

in order to convince the zamindar's son, the brother-in-law and the *divan* (who deals in revenue and litigation matters) to be mild and seek a peaceful arbitration and settlement of the dispute. These three, in turn, persuade the lord Ranpal Singh (father of Yamuna) and a settlement is reached. Thus, due to baḍī dāi's intervention, the dispute is settled and the proposal of Yamuna and Balvant's wedding is floated. Balvant hesitantly and happily agrees; so does Yamuna's father, zamindar Ranpal Singh.

One may wonder why baḍī dāi is such an important figure in the narrative. Why actions that should have ideally been assigned to the sarkar, the lady of the household, are conscripted onto the character of baḍī dāi? The narrative of the early novel, in general, is spatially structured into two separate but interlinked domains of home and the outside world. In this gendered division, the ideal household is governed by the lady of the household, tellingly addressed as 'sarkar' by the servants.[11] She is expected to be a sovereign in the domestic space, and should be responsible for the maintenance of (moral–ethical) order in the family. The circulation of her sovereignty, however, is confined to the precincts of the home, for her mobility is strictly limited and she does not step outside. Therefore, she needs someone to transport her authority outside the physical space of home, where other matters pertaining to household circulate. In such a household, baḍī dāi emerges as a critical figure. Since baḍī dāi's movement is unrestricted, because she is a lower-class/caste and also old woman, she provides what the lady of the household lacks (especially when the matters of the home travel out into the world). She acts as a proxy or go-between in the spaces outside, where the mistress simply cannot move because of the confining social code of middle-class respectability. It is because of her class position that dāi can do what the lady cannot. In this way, some of the sovereignty of the mistress is parcelled out to baḍī dāi.

In the cases of Chanchaliya and Sukni in the novel under discussion, baḍī dāi is more than just an inert carrier of the sarkar's power outside the confines of home. Baḍī dāi embodies, manoeuvres and performs her mistress's inferred authority on a daily basis, while simultaneously carrying the mark of her servile status. Despite being a servant, on the basis of her loyalty, honesty, integrity and devotion to the values and wellbeing of the

[11] Even the servant-letters discussed above address the lady as sarkar.

household, baḍī dāi earns and carves out a unique position for herself. At the cost of losing her individuality (her own family is of no relevance in the story), she is elevated to a higher status; she is *like* a member of her master's family. So, she is superior in hierarchy of servants, because she is unlike a typical waged worker, who performs assigned work and retreats into her/his own home outside of working hours. Rather, she lives to care for her master's family. Unlike the maids of the educational manual, baḍī dāi's duty and deeds in the novel operate in the register of care and affect. Consequently, she assists and often substitutes sarkar in looking after the daily affairs of home; she carries the trinkets of the latter's authority. However, her authority is always mediated and carries the mark of her identity as servant. Although she advises and instructs the young maiden and bride, with the larger aim of maintaining the ethos of the household, and is duly respected by them as a senior woman of the family, in critical moments the dāi never fails to drop a reminder that she is after all their lauṇḍī or dāsī. Thus, she has no absolute authority over them, yet her loyalty to the sarkar obliges her to speak in the interests of the household. She commands, while being submissive at the same time. The younger women reciprocate with endearing compliance.

Baḍī dāi has interesting language, tone and gestures. To cite some examples, she addresses the young bride of the house using the respectable and formal pronoun *āp* and does not sit in her presence, but the tone of her speech remains edifying. Meanwhile, the bride does what the senior maid asks her to do. The bride (the would-be lady of the house) keeps *pardā* (veil) from the senior maid, and she also does not sit on her bed in her presence. The bride's manners are reverential, but she maintains a masterly distance and bridal silence simultaneously. Similarly, dāi is *like* an elder family woman, she is like another mother to the master's daughter.[12] She is a protector of the family's daughter outside the home as well as inside. She accompanies her as a servant and a guardian when the daughter goes out. Inside the home, she is caretaker of her moral, social, psychological (and potentially sexual) feelings and requirements. The duties and deeds

[12] Their mode of address is less hierarchical and informal. Dāi is addressed as *daiyā* by the family daughter, dāi addresses her as *tum* (informal 'you'). In the region where the novel is set, a grandmother is also called dāi.

of baḍī dāi and the ideal lady of the household, although distinguished by bold markers of class difference, are overlapping and fused into one another in the novel. What defines dāi's character is her unique relation to the sarkar and her extra-monetary service as affective caretaker of a (Hindu) family's values and culture.

In other words, the figure of baḍī dāi shares and supplements the duties and responsibilities of the ideal wife-woman of the household. Dāi effectively belongs to the same home as the sarkar; her individual identity as a household woman, wife and mother is irrelevant. Her moral integrity and loyalty to the household are unwavering. She puts herself at risk for the greater family good. She is articulate and upright, yet conforms to the code of social hierarchy (master/mistress–servant relationship). These qualities make her the moral axis of the family. She is also the bearer of the moral compass: she communicates in her conversation with divan that the patriarch is harassing the innocent lad. Her indefatigable service to the household has implications which manifest beyond the domestic world: the long drawn-out zamindari conflict is settled; a maiden is married with the best available suitor in the local clan. In fact, the dynamic figure of baḍī dāi and, by extension, the mistress–maid relationship, emerge as the constitutive axis in the early Hindi novel set in the discursive frame of the home and the outside world, which sought to redesign the architecture of relationships in the Hindu household.

SERVANT AS FIGURE OF CONTRAST

Moving away from nineteenth-century literary examples, in this section we consider the representation of domestic servants in the early twentieth-century cartoon or *vyaṃgya-citra* (literally, visual satire) which appeared in Hindi periodicals.[13] Hindi journals, especially in

[13] For literary monthlies, which operated with a reformist rhetoric and an agenda of serving the nation, the new art form of the cartoon appeared to be a potentially attractive genre with a distinctive function. For the editors, the cartoon was an entertaining medium which attracted a popular readership on the one hand. On the other, it could sharply intervene into contemporary public issues as the bearer of reformist polemic with an elevated but implicit aim of rectification, improvement and reform by highlighting the anomaly of the subject. Many editors and commentators expounded

1920s and 1930s, published cartoons in large numbers on a variety of topical themes and issues ranging from literary and political to social and religious questions and polemics. Save a few exceptions in which servants were central subjects, in most instances servants' presence remained contingent on shifting contemporary nationalist polemics related to women's questions.[14] Yet, their shadowed presence was symbolically charged, and the relationship with their mistress was perhaps constitutive of the caricaturing practice pertaining to contemporary Indian social life. However, we shall begin with an unusual cartoon which had the domestic servant as its central subject matter, and then discuss some more common themes.

A cartoon plate (see Figure 5.2), showing contrasts between the maid in India and the West, largely reflects the continuation of the nineteenth-century agenda, which sought to include domestic servants in its project of reform and improvement. The cartoon implies that the Indian maidservant needs to be reformed, for she is rude, ill-mannered, unsophisticated. When a guest visits in the master's absence, the Indian maidservant, unlike her

vyangya-citra as artwork with a dual purpose: 'one purpose is pure amusement and second is reform'—so wrote the editor of *Sudhā*, for example. See Dularelal Bhargava's editorial note in *Sudhā*, March 1929. For more details on the history of cartooning practice in Hindi periodicals, see Prabhat Kumar, 'Satire, Modernity, Transculturality in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century North India' (Ph.D. thesis, South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, 2015), chapter 5.

[14] While the concerns of the late nineteenth-century reformist agenda had certain continuities, new concerns in the light of nationalist/Gandhian politics added more nuance and forms to the gender question. Women were no longer conceived as exclusively a creature of the home, but as someone whose field is equally outside its confines—in politics, the academy, sports, etc. Problems related to middle-class women's confinement, the drudgery of household work, health and hygiene, freedom and right to movement and feeling, and the safety and security of women in public spaces (often from lecherous men belonging to other religious communities) were added to the previous agenda of education, widow remarriage, unequal marriage and so forth. The gender question was enriched with the addition of class and sometimes caste dimensions. Madhu Kishwar, 'Gandhi on Women', *Economic & Political Weekly* 20, no. 40, 1985, 1691–702; Sobna Nijhawan, *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere: Periodical Literature in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012); Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Western counterpart, does not entertain him or bother to ask about him and the purpose of his visit. Nor does the Indian maidservant let the respectable guest enter the precinct of the house. She does not even allow him to rest his feet but gestures for him to go away, whereas the maid in the West—or the ideal maid—is shown to be genteel in her behaviour. She welcomes the guest inside into the living room, gestures for him to sit and asks the purpose of his visit.

FIGURE 5.2: Ghar kī naukrānī: yahāṃ ki vahāṃ ki [Domestic Servant: Here and There] (*Chānd*, March 1930)

Clearly, this cartoon continues to operate along the lines of the older register of reform, implying that a maidservant—an essential component of the household—also needs to be educated and reformed. Yet, this vision of a model servant is different from the previous century. The Indian maid's attitude may have been perfect had she been a nineteenth-century baḍī dāi. She is, after all, preventing a stranger male from entering the home in her master's absence. But now, in keeping with the ideal wife-woman of the twentieth century (who is expected to be educated, may enter politics or social-educational service outside the home, travel and socialise with male and female colleagues and comrades, and potentially contribute to

the cause of anti-colonial agitation and nationalist activities),[15] the maids too were expected to be pleasant and welcoming in their demeanour towards a male stranger or an unknown visitor.

Apart from such exceptional cartoons that put servants at the centre of their narrative, domestic servants figure in multiple political contexts, ranging from criticising the affluence and indulgence of European and Indian elites to reforming and transforming the values governing an ideal Hindu/Indian family and, by extension, nation. Mostly, the cartoons use the language of class to highlight the conceit of affluent members of society. They ridicule or chastise the rich men and women for falling short in their affinity for fellow subaltern citizens.

Let us begin with a cartoon, 'Misej Lahsun' (Mrs Garlic), which appeared alongside a skit of the same title in the journal *Prabhā* (Kanpur, March 1923). From the subtitle of the visual, the reader knows that Mrs Garlic is an English woman, wife of a district collector who lived 150 years back (Figure 5.3).

The cartoon depicts the memsahib sitting luxuriously in the middle of her make-up room, beneath a fan and attended by dark-skinned maids: one coiffing her hair and another doing pedicure. Viewed alongside the skit, the cartoon mocks a greedy and pretentious white mistress, who throws around her weight and power over junior officers, collects expensive gifts/bribes from them and leads an indolent life. The domestic servants here are an index of the colonial master's indulgence, who thrives at the expense of Indian subjects. Dark-skinned and flat-nosed maids thus appear to depict not only the opulent life of colonial masters, but also probably the ordinary Indian population and their servility, if we consider this visual alongside the overall political tenor of the journal.[16]

[15] Many cartoons directly or indirectly depict 'good' women (real or imagined) as educated, working as a teacher, travelling on public transport, and speaking in polite diction and language.

[16] *Prabhā* was printed by the same publishing house that published *Pratāp*, the fiery nationalist newspaper of Kanpur edited by Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi. The image is taken from G. F. Atkinson, *'Curry and Rice', on Forty Plates, Or the Ingredients of Social Life at 'Our Stations' in India* (London: Day and Son, 1859). In the satirical sketch book *Curry and Rice*, this image accompanies a skit titled 'Our Magistrate's Wife' and the protagonist is called Mrs Chutney. The English skit ridicules an indolent and pretentious memsahib who is a stupid and unsophisticated white woman. She pretends to be

FIGURE 5.3: 'Misej Lahsun' [Mrs Garlic] (Prabhā, March 1923)

Servants were used as an index for ordinary Indians as well as contrasting figures against which conceited rich Indians can be seen in another cartoon, titled 'Gṛhalakśmī' (Figure 5.4). Published in the same journal, this depicts a fat woman wearing precious ornaments spinning cotton on a spinning wheel, which is fixed to a table. She is showing a thread of cotton to her husband with a smile. Her husband is standing beside her and looks on smilingly; in his hand is a bottle labelled 'horse embrocation'. Servants are standing behind the woman, carrying hand-held fans and drinks. The caption below is the conversation between the couple, showing that the wife is ridiculously happy about mastering spinning after

cultured by flaunting her conviviality, acquiring expensive cutlery, musical instruments, etc., but she sings like a hyena. In its Hindi reproduction, the skit clearly undergoes a major transformation; there is no explicit mention of corruption and bribery in the English version. Using an image from such a widely known book was perhaps a strategy to deflect the colonial government's surveillance.

two long years of trying; the husband pampers her with the somewhat sarcastic remark, 'You are working harder than Mahatma Gandhi.'

FIGURE 5.4 'Gṛhalakśmī' [Goddess of the Household] (Prabhā, May 1923)[17]

Wife: Look, I spin so well, I learnt the art of spinning in merely two years.

Husband: Why can't you master the art of spinning, are you just anybody! Even Gandhiji would not have worked so hard in gaol. Anyway, leave it. You must be tired. For your pain I have brought 'horse embrocation'. Ah! Working so much in this heat! (To servants) What are you all looking at? Fan her. And what is in your hand, sherbet? (To wife) Please drink this first.

This is also an overtly political cartoon. Amidst the social reconstruction programme initiated by Mahatma Gandhi and his fellow Congressmen,

[17] Also reprinted in *Vyaṃgya-citrāvalī* [A Handbook of Visual Satire] (Cawnpore: Prakash Pustakalay, 1927).

the act of spinning was linked with self-imposed austerity and seen as a direct contribution to the cause of the Indian quest for an alternative national economy. Spinning also provided a new sense of economic self-reliance and political significance to women within the household.[18] In such a context, one interpretation of this cartoon could be that it makes a conservative and gendered mockery of the inflated accolade received by rich household women, who take up spinning as a leisurely activity at the cost of their everyday household duties and are, in return, pampered by their meek husbands. As if spinning few strings of cotton is tantamount to working as hard as a horse, and one required a massage (with horse embrocation) to counter work fatigue! However, the cartoon can also be read as an implicit criticism of the practice of the Gandhian programme of self-austerity in affluent homes, whereby the purpose of spinning cotton—originally intended to promote thriftiness and purification—is defeated. Spinning is shown as a rather self-indulgent activity. It is far from being an indication of self-reliance; on the contrary, it is shown that the act involves an army of servants and attendants. Standing to serve in the background, the servants seem to be a symbol of a rich household. They also appear to be the ordinary subaltern citizens, looking surprised (and probably appalled) at the duplicity and conceit of their rich Indian/Hindu masters pretending commitment to the nationalist cause.

The image of servant as an index to highlight the duplicity and conceit of the masters did not always portray the former in a good light either. They were also marked out as being a moral–sexual threat to the value of the Hindu household, as they were feared to have intimacy with their masters/mistresses.[19] They were thus used as sexually menacing figures with the aim to highlight the problems of a Hindu/Indian patriarchal family. For example, *Bāhar aur bhītar* uses the figure of the dāsī (maid) to highlight the duplicity of the Hindu patriarchy and its discriminatory and repressive sexual regulations, supported by scriptures (Figure 5.5). The

[18] Kishwar, 'Gandhi on Women'.

[19] This fear was more pronounced in the case of Muslim and lower-caste servants. Charu Gupta has rightly pointed this out in detail, especially in the context of (Muslim) male servant versus mistress. Suffice to add that it operated in the opposite coupling, that is, female servant versus the master, as well. Gupta, 'Domestic Anxieties, Recalcitrant Intimacies', 162.

cartoon contrasts the plight of a wailing young widow—who is handcuffed with scriptural sanctions and cursed to stay in celibacy inside the home—to the sexual licentiousness of the patriarch who openly flirts with the maid outside. The image of the maid as a sexually flirtatious woman, although secondary to the narrative, is nonetheless deployed to ridicule the conceit of the Hindu patriarchy and its ethos, which represses its women but gives a free ride to the men.

FIGURE 5.5: Bāhar aur bhītar [Outside and Inside] (*Chānd*, August 1933)

Servant figures were used not only in attacking the privileged Hindu men but also for critiquing the rich and indulgent Hindu/Indian women, apathetic about the plight of their poor counterparts. As a part of the cultural pedagogy of reform, such cartoons tend to address broader

moral-behavioural questions: How should an ideal Hindu woman behave, especially with regard to deprived or subaltern women?

For example, see Figure 5.6: a cartoon plate depicts two snapshots of exploitation and humiliation perpetrated by rich women/mistresses. In the first scene, titled *Nirāśritā vidhvā* (a destitute widow), a lady is sitting leisurely on a big sofa, engrossed in a novel, while a poor widow woman is said to have been working tirelessly in the kitchen from early morning till noon without eating anything all. The lady does not even bother to assist her so that she can take a break to eat. In the second scene, *Baṛe ghar kī mahilā* (woman of a rich household), a young mistress is scolding her maid for not cleaning the room adequately and threatens to kick her and fire her from the job. Meanwhile, the maid listens to her submissively with a surprised face, probably because there is no visible trace of waste to be seen in the room.

Figure 5.6: Nirāśritā vidhvā [A Destitute Widow]—Baṛe ghar kī mahilā [Woman of a Rich Household] (*Chānd*, June 1940)

In the first instance, the domestic help is a destitute widow who has no other means to survive. She is probably (distant) elder kin of the family, as she addresses the lady as *Bahūjī* (the bride). Due to her backbreaking

job of domestic service, she barely manages to eat on time and probably has no shelter of her own and, therefore, stays in the lady's house. The rich and self-indulgent young lady is not only insensitive to the plight of her destitute kin and maid, she also wastes her time in entertaining herself instead of doing productive work. The figure of a novel-reading woman, in contemporary visual and literary discourse, is predominantly vested with negative attributes. Likewise, the shouting and yelling mistress, in the second instance, is simply an arrogant and wicked rich woman who humiliates another woman of subaltern class and caste for no good reason. The sweeper/maid, as depicted, is subjected to daily humiliation, while the tenure of her service is also deeply insecure and fragile. In both instances, the plight of the domestic worker is expressed in the idiom of satire and sentimentality, which provokes a sense of moral outrage against the cruel and insensitive mistress. To put it differently, such representations push the issue of their exploitation into the moral and emotional realm and thereby perhaps deflect from the material and economic aspects. To end her mistreatment, all that is needed is a reformation of the attitude of the mistress. Kind behaviour, nice gestures and empathetic care on the part of a mistress were panacea for a maid's problems. Such cartoons thus shared the premise that domestic work is more about non-material and affective service.

These rich wife-woman-mistresses, moreover, were contrasting figures who were exactly opposite to the image of an ideal women. The ideal Indian woman figure remained elusive and intangible—they could only be imagined through the (seductive) figuration of mobile and active European women beyond the precincts of home. Indian women (silently suffering, overburdened, duty-bound ordinary middle-class wife-women) were apparently still trapped in the drudgery of household chores. For example, in Figures 5.7 and 5.8, see the images of the Hindu/Indian wife-woman, who is contrasted with her Western counterpart. Working in the contrasting spatio-temporal frame of 'We and They' or 'East and West', such visuals called for the urgency of social reform: Indian women lagging behind their Western equivalents must be set free from the cells of home. They should not bend down with a lowly gaze, rather they should straighten up, raise their heads, rise high and enter public spaces like European women.

Figure 5.7 Purvī aur paścimī nari jīvan [Women's Lives in the East and the West] (*Chānd*, September 1934)

FIGURE 5.8: Ham aur ve [Us and Them] (*Chānd*, March 1932)

Ironically, instead of flying or marching ahead towards the open horizon, these women were stagnating in the confines of the home, doing the 'devalued' work of cleaning, cooking and nursing—tasks that could also have been performed by domestic servants. While such cartoons may explain the quantitative invisibility of domestic workers in illustrations concerning domestic space, which are mostly populated by toiling wife-women, qualitatively speaking, the 'We and They'–type images highlighting such national contrasts flattened the category of 'Indian woman'. The wife and/or the maid, it is implicit, share the same fate of household drudgery. Whereas in images underlining class contrasts, their differences are clearly marked—the wife lazes on the sofa and reads a novel while the servant toils. So, the reformist agenda was far from homogenous. It used servants sometimes to highlight the 'ills' of the modern wife and hid them at times to flatten the hierarchy between wives and maids. There is, it seems, an impossibly unitary agenda of reform in both the conditions. Unlike the West in this period, when domestic service had declined due to the First World War, technological innovations, political suffrage and so on, in India the early twentieth century was a period that saw a rise in numbers of female servants. So, the 'nationalist resolution of women's questions' remained fraught vis-à-vis the class of maidservants. It did not know whether to use them as a prop to criticise 'modern wives' and their manners or to hide them to put forth an image of a unified 'Indian woman'. In other words, domestic servants perhaps did not allow the completion of the 'nationalist resolution'; it remained indeterminate.

Servants as *figures of contrast* therefore had a constitutive presence and unsettling effect in images satirising the domain of home. In the next section, we shall discuss some contemporary prose writings which, besides contrasting their situations, elevated servants as morally superior to the class of masters.

SERVANTS AS MORALLY SUPERIOR SUBALTERNS

> सच तो यह है कि मैं सबिया को उसके पौराणिक नारीत्व के निकट पाती हूँ जिसने जीवन की सीमा-रेखा किसी अज्ञात लोक तक फैला दी थी | उसे यदि जीवन के लिए मृत्यु से लड़ना पड़ा तो यह न मरने के लिए जीवन से संघर्ष करती है | (3 मार्च 1935)

> The truth is that I find Sabiā closer to the legendry (*paurānik*) womanhood [of Savitri] who extended the frontier of life to the unknown realm. If she had to fight with death for the sake of life, [Sabiā] has been struggling with life to avoid being dead. (3 March 1935)

The quotation above is the closing paragraph of Mahadevi Varma's sketch *Sabiā* (1935).[20] Its protagonist is her own sweeper woman named Sabiā, which was apparently a rustic derivative of the high Hindi name Savitri. Paralleled to her mythological counterpart Savitri, the subject of Mahadevi's sketch (*śabd-citra*/*rekhā-citra*), Sabiā, is an empathetic character study of a hardworking and reticent *mehtar* (sweeper) woman's life. Sabiā's personality is marked by her selfless love and loyalty to her husband, who deserts her for another woman. She works as a domestic worker in the author's house in order to maintain the bare minimum requirements of her own household. She feeds herself, her infants and blind mother-in-law. One day, the husband returns home with his second wife. Sabiā takes up their responsibilities too, in spite of daily humiliation and torture by him and the younger wife. What is more, she puts her few possessions at stake when he is accused of burglary and taken into police custody.

Written in 1935 in delicately poised prose with a socially sensitive standpoint by a leading woman litterateur committed to the principles of gender and social equality, the sketch inverts the stereotypical public image of lower-caste female (domestic worker) as a foulmouthed, lascivious, unruly character.[21] Mahadevi's *Sabiā* provides a critical counter-narrative

[20] Mahādevī Varmā, *Atīt ke calcitra* [The Moving Images of the Past] (Ilāhābād: Bhārtī Bhavan, 1941), 50; author's translation. Mahadevi is also known as the one of the earliest female poets of modern Hindi along with her friend Subhadra Kumari Chauhan. She was one of the leading poets of Chāyāvādī, or the romantic school of Hindi poetry, along with Pant, Prasad and Nirala. A rebel who refused to accept her child marriage, she remained a spinster and ran schools for poor children and then a nationalist college for young women as part of her larger nationalist public commitment. For more, see Karine Schomer, *Mahadevi Varma and Chhayavad Age of Modern Hindi Poetry* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[21] It should be kept in mind that there was a general consensus amongst the new generation of writers to give literary voice and representation to ordinary people: the peasants, the workers and the lower classes—the 'real' constituents of the Indian nation.

to the dominant upper-caste middle-class view of the time, abundantly reflected in the advice literature.[22] Described by her mistress, Sabiā is identified primarily as a persevering woman, who earns her livelihood as a domestic worker and hails from a lower-caste sweeper community. The narrative, however, merges the question of her class and caste identity into the story of gender. Indeed, it turns out to be a tale of gender solidarity: the elite woman shows solidarity with her subaltern comrade. Gender solidarity, in this case, transcends the barrier of class on the grounds of morality. For the servant woman Sabiā emerges as a morally superior being—an ideal, industrious, selfless woman struggling against all material and social odds—she is a modern Savitri. Such qualities markedly contrast and distinguish her individuality and character from her elite counterparts (affluent upper-caste housewives).[23] The strength of Sabiā's character is defined by her loyalty, labour, conscientiousness and reticence. She is not only an ideal servant in her lady's household; she is also the economic and moral axis of her own family. The narrative of the female domestic servant thus also seamlessly plies between two households: the master's as well as the servant's.

If we try to understand the master–servant relationship through such pieces, *Sabiā* is also reflective of a new kind of literary endeavour

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This consensus was reflective of the literary zeitgeist of the time. Soon, in fact within a year, such opinion took institutional shape in the programmatic literary agenda of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA), led by nationalist young men influenced by Marxist ideas. Carlo Coppola, ed., *Marxist Influences and South Asian Literature*, vol. 2 (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Asian Studies Centre, 1974). Mahadevi, although sympathetic to its larger aim, was never part of the PWA, as she was sceptical of the constraints of an ideologically driven literary imagination. She was initially the target of young 'progressive' men, but later her works, especially such life-sketches of subaltern characters, were greatly admired by them. For her troubled relationship with the PWA, see Schomer, *Mahadevi Varma*, 260–70.

[22] Charu Gupta has pointed this out by looking at advice manuals of the early twentieth century. See *Gender of Caste*, chapters 1 and 2.

[23] When an acquaintance of the author/mistress, who was wife of an advocate (*vakīl-patnī*), quips at her about employing the wife of a thief, the latter snubs her: '*Yadi dusare ke dhan ko kisī prakār apna banā lenā corī hai to main jannā cāhatī huṃ ki hamme se kaun sampanna mahilā chor-patnī nahīṃ hai*' ['If making other's wealth one's own by hook or by crook is theft, I would like to know how many of rich women amongst us are not thieves' partners'], Varmā, *Atīt ke calcitra*, 50.

or quest for a new mode of expression: how to write about unequal and exploitative master–servant relationships if the author is committed to egalitarian and emancipatory politics in her/his everyday social life but is also herself/himself placed in the hierarchical relationship holding position of authority. *Sabiā* and other such sketches humanised and aestheticised these quotidian and omnipresent beings called servants, who had hitherto been either invisible or simply stock characters without much individuality, and were either idolised or stigmatised. For Mahadevi, the mistress and the writer, her servants were like members of the family and, as Francesca Orsini has also pointed out, she even refused to call them servants.[24] Sketches such as *Sabiā* indicate the beginning of a new narrative style, in which a middle-class author/master elevates her servants as literary and moral heroes and tempers the master–servant relationship with the colours of personal affinity and attachment, without blurring the ineffaceable marks of class difference.[25] It can be gleaned from the sketch that the image of author/narrator/mistress is of a benign and benevolent master, who ensures that the outcaste woman servant gets dignified treatment

[24] Orsini's main concern is to explore Mahadevi's literary-political strategies of self-reticence. She examines the predicament of a lone woman author who refused to lead a conventional life and chose, instead, to remain single, leading an autonomous life and also probably setting an example of an alternative family populated by a band of destitute, abandoned or widowed women working as servants. She contends that 'in embracing this retinue of what she refused to call "servants," Mahadevi found a way out of the impasses of the modern woman and modern writer outlined in her essays. She could be independent and yet caring, leading an autonomous life yet respected for her charitable attitude, a sophisticated middle-class intellectual who could be approached by, and who respected, illiterate menials as individuals. This fulfilled both a social and an individual exigency. By positioning herself in the midst of this alternative family Mahadevi showed that she accepted, while refashioning, customary ties of family and responsibility—this time not as a bride in a patriarchal family but from a position of authority as a woman householder and a hostel warden.' Francesca Orsini, 'The Reticent Autobiographer: Mahadevi Varma's Writings', in *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and Life History*, ed. David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), 68.

[25] This can be argued not only in the case of 'feminist' Mahadevi and her servant sketches, but also about many socialist male authors such as Rambriksha Benipuri and his servant sketch, *Maṃgar*—his ploughman. See 'Maṃgar', in *Benipurī Graṃthāvalī*, ed. Rambrikśha Benipurī (Pantā: Benipurī Prakāśan, 1953), 29–36.

from other (caste Hindu) servants, and must not be served leftover food, or *jūṭhan*. She observes the maid's activity inside the home—her fastidious working style, her little daughter guarding her baby brother and such like—and discovers unexpected beauty amidst the everydayness of a maid's ordinary life and its struggles. She cares about the personal and familial problems of her maid, and frequently helps her out by giving money and goods beyond her stipulated wage to ease her mountain of troubles. However, in her everyday interactions, the mistress also maintains a polite and masterly distance. She does not speak to the maid much, or for that matter to any other servant. Yet, she receives sufficient information from another servant Bhaktin (a garrulous, widowed, elderly Ahir maid) who, knowing her mistress's reserved attitude, narrates more than enough details pertaining to all the other servants' lives, including Sabiā's. The mistress's controlled demeanour and reserved expressions are so immaculate that even after listening to the troubles of a weeping Sabiā, when her husband is gaoled for theft, her countenance and appearance remain calm and unmoved. She does not let her feelings come out. She stores them deep inside her, probably to sketch them later in her elegant and sensitive style.

THE 'REFORMIST' MASTER AND HIS SERVANT

Rambriksha Benipuri's story *Vah cor thā* ('He Was a Thief'; written in gaol during 1930–32) reflects on the problems of master–servant relationship more closely, albeit the story is narrated from the perspective of a socialist author and his moral certitude.[26] Set against the backdrop of high tide

[26] Rambriksha Benipuri (1899–1968) was a progressive writer, journalist, editor, pamphleteer and socialist politician. He was a biographer of Jayaprakash Narayan, Marx, Mao, Rosa Luxemberg, etc.; editor of a dozen anti-colonial nationalist periodicals; chief editor of the Socialist Party's Hindi mouthpiece *Jantā*; and author of plays, sketches, short stories and children's stories. He was frequently imprisoned on charges of sedition and spent more than eight years in gaol as a political prisoner. He was a young leader of the Congress, Congress Socialist Party and Kisan Sabha in Bihar. He left Congress to join the Socialist Party after Independence. After the merger of the Krishak Praja Party and the Socialist Party, he was the leader of Praja Socialist Party (PSP). He contested elections too and was also once elected as a member of the legislative assembly for PSP in Bihar. In the 1950s, he was also a prominent member of the cultural wing of the Socialist Party, which was bitterly opposed to the Communist Party of India–led

of Gandhian nationalism during the early 1930s, the story begins with a nationalist zamindar's relatively privileged life in gaol as an 'A' class political prisoner. Lakshmi Singh has embraced nationalism because it was politically fashionable and also possibly beneficial to be a *Khaddharvālā* (Gandhian). Life in prison was not so difficult after all for the respectable class of prisoners.[27] In gaol he is exposed to new ideas, and socialist ideas impress themselves upon him. He immediately changes his behaviour towards his prison attendants: 'C' class prisoners. Later he employs one of them, Laloo, as his domestic servant. However, his behavioural transformation remains limited to this one individual servant, and he later wants to cultivate Laloo as a model servant (and himself as a model master) to showcase his reformist self. However, he fails in this project.

The story goes like this: Lakshmi Singh is quite happy with the convenient life in gaol wherein he, following the general trend, develops the habit of reading new literature. He gets attracted to the idea of socialism. However, he settles for Robert Oven against Karl Marx and dreams of opening an *āśram* (commune). He changes his behaviour towards his gaol attendants, the grade 'C' prisoners. He starts addressing one attendant Laloo, not as Lalua but as Laloo *bhāi* (brother). He wishes to know about the material reasons for his present plight. After listening to the remorseful narration of Laloo, who was an agricultural labourer and, forced by circumstances of poverty and penury, had turned into a thief to feed his hungry wife and five children, the zamindar wishes to help and transform him. The zamindar is released soon as a result of the Gandhi–Irwin Pact; he sends money to Laloo's family and asks Laloo to join him as domestic servant after his release. Months pass. Zamindar forgets his Ovenian project, goes back to his estate, exploiting poor *raiyat*s (tenants). However, he treats them with feast once in a year to boast of his patrimonial benevolence amongst his fellow zamindars. But Laloo is eventually released from gaol and joins him as servant. He employs Laloo as his personal attendant, with a view to observing him lest he steal and

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PWA. For more details, see Prabhat Kumar, 'Rambriksha Benipuri: Man and His Ideas' (Mphil. diss., Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2003).

[27] Benipuri's gaol memoir (*Jaṃjīreṃ aur dīvāreṃ*), written around same time, deals with this theme at length. Rambrikśha Benipurī, *Jaṃjīreṃ aur dīvāreṃ* [Fetters and Fences] (Dillī: Rājpāl and Saṃs, 1957).

run away. But Laloo becomes an object of exhibition, a specimen to be flaunted as part of his initiative to reform humanity contra socialism. Laloo serves him earnestly and not only elevates himself in his master's eyes, but also becomes the subject of jealousy amongst the fellow servants and other members of the household. Some warn the zamindar not to trust his servant overmuch, for he may show his true colours one day. When Lakshmi Singh reads a letter from Laloo's wife describing the difficulties at home, his wage is hiked from 7 rupees to 10 rupees per month, and it is even proposed that he bring his sons from his village to educate them. The obliged servant keeps himself even more attentive and duty bound. The master gradually trusts him more and Laloo takes charge of his personal belongings, including essential documents, suitcase, money purse and ornaments. A few months later, the master finds his belongings missing, first his Parker pen, then his gold watch and then his purse. The scared servant perceives his master's discomfort and suspicion, cries in the night but is unable to alleviate the latter's doubts. The master first tries to hide, lest he is ridiculed for his enlightened benevolence. Then he reconsiders his opinion about Laloo showing his true colours. Lakshmi Singh gives 100 rupees to his servant and asks him to leave. While the stunned Laloo runs away and jumps into the Ganges, the master hums: '*Sūrdās' kārī kamar par caḍhat na dūjo raṃg*'.[28]

This story, evidently, deals with the master–servant relationship. It is told from a deeply moral perspective of the narrator/author. It mainly reflects on the predicament of a 'reformist' master and, by implication, of the servant.[29] On the surface, the story appears to be a sarcastic commentary on the pretentious lord who tries to pose as enlightened master. It underlines the heightened problem of reformist paternalism, which the zamindar subscribes to in order to retain his privilege and dominance in the light of fashionable but unsettling egalitarian ideas, which were apparently unleashed during the time of the anti-colonial nationalist movement.

[28] 'As the saint-poet Surdas said, [my] black blanket cannot be dyed in another colour.' See 'Vah cor thā', in *Benipurī Graṃthāvalī*, ed. Rambrikśha Benipurī (Pantā: Benipurī Prakāśan, 1953), 41–60.

[29] Reformist in both senses: in the Marxist sense of the term as ideologically compromised, as well as in the sense of moral–social reform.

At a deeper level, it exposes the moral contradiction of class privilege. Within the moral universe of the story, the source of moral legitimacy and respectability of a leader lies in his commitment to (anti-colonial) nationalism; traditional social status is no longer adequate, no matter if he is a member of the traditionally privileged class. Moreover, to be a good nationalist one has to be informed about new ideas and ethics. He should be treating others as equals, no matter to which class they belong to, as bhāi, by sacrificing one's own privilege, by reforming one's own self (self-purification), by uplifting his weaker counterpart and so forth.

In the story, the master aspires to but falls short of this moral expectation. Tempted to reform a fallen but repenting subaltern, who has become a thief because of poverty, he employs him as his domestic servant, yet remains suspicious of the servant's character. The servant is given his due salary; he is addressed by his proper name, against the prevalent humiliating ways of treating servants virtually as 'slaves'. However, the lord's enticement to alter his behaviour towards the servant, the reader is told, is not honestly aimed at transforming his masterly self. Instead, it is a means to flaunt his apparent reformist self to other leaders/zamindars. The showcasing of 'humane treatment' is also evident from the fact that he accords special treatment to a singled-out individual (the chosen one, Laloo), but not to the other servants.

Whatever might be the predicament of the master, the servant, though happily perplexed by the novel attitude of his master in the beginning, remains emotionally unsettled and even perpetually insecure. His work starts in the early morning, before the master gets up. It ends when the lord goes to bed. He always feels the weight of his patron's beneficence. He remains insecure lest he commit any mistake inadvertently and his service will be terminated forever. Laloo, in the end, becomes the victim of reformist paternalism. When the master's belongings start being stolen, he is unable to plead his innocence; he cannot speak to his self-righteous master. The master does not inquire about the lost items; he concludes it all to be the failure of his reformist project. A subaltern cannot be reformed because of his own sins: as the saint-poet Surdas said, '[my] black blanket cannot be dyed in another colour'. The master thinks not about the plight of his servant and the possibility of his innocence, but about the reaction of his peers and how would they taunt or laugh at him after hearing of the fate of his reformist venture.

Apart from providing distinctive insights into the question of class and reformist paternalism, Benipuri's story also shares at least three common threads with Mahadevi's *Sabiā*. First, the story of the domestic servant is not exclusively the story of the servant in terms of the master's household. It is also the story of the servant's own household. In literary representation, the two are entangled. In fact, the individuality of the servant's life and world is maintained in the interwoven narrative of the two distinct households. Benipuri's story clearly delineates who is a domestic servant, and considers his family, class and social place before being a domestic servant.[30] It tells of the economic problems faced by an agricultural labourer and his household, recounting the travails of poverty and hunger and consequent dehumanisation. To become a domestic servant is not only economically a better option, but also relatively more dignified vocation than that of agricultural labour.

Second, as with *Sabiā*, the moral superiority of the subaltern is clearly asserted against the upper-class counterpart. In the climax of *Vah cor thā*, the patron is repentant of his self-serving generosity accorded to his 'undeserving' servant. To him, what mattered was not the dignity and self-respect of his servant, but the failure of his reformist (self-purifying) endeavour. Ironically, instead of questioning his own self, he blamed his servant. On the contrary, the servant was unable to bear the fact that he had lost his benevolent master's trust in spite of his innocence. It is the loss of his self-respect that forces him to commit suicide.[31]

[30] Laloo was an agricultural labourer, who was able to maintain his household with the help of his beautiful companion and wife. He worked as a labourer on the farm of the local landlord. His hardworking wife supplemented his earnings. She reared cattle and goats during the daytime, and worked in the kitchen during morning and evening. The drudgery of hard work took its toll on her beauty. The hard life of the class of agricultural labourer became unbearable when Laloo was blessed with children. The livestock were gradually sold, as their wages were no longer adequate. Hunger turned Laloo into a thief, who stole crops from others' fields to feed his starving family. One day he was caught and imprisoned. In gaol, he met his future master, the zamindar Lakshmi Singh.

[31] This insight is taken from D. R. Nagaraj's illuminating essay on the oppositional yet complementary ideas of self-purification versus self-respect. However, I have deployed them slightly differently. D. R. Nagaraj, 'Self-Purification vs Self-Respect: On the Roots of Dalit Movement in India', in *The Flaming Feet and Other Essays: The Dalit Movement in India*, ed. Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010), 21–60.

Third, despite the obvious generic difference between the sketch and short story discussed above, there is another commonality: a good servant is not really like a servant at all, he becomes like kin to the master. Hence, Laloo was different from (other) servants, not only in terms of his dress and demeanour but also because of his special affectionate ties with the master. In order to become an ideal master, the zamindar also personally took care of Laloo's familial obligations, beyond his stipulated wage. Paternalist and involved affection, however, coexisted with adherence to the norm of an informal and reserved demeanour in the same period. The zamindar thus maintained masterly aura in his own manners. He obliged his servant and looked in the other direction—a masterly gesture indeed. He bestowed favour like a lord: the faithful servant did not know that he had done so, yet his blessings reached his wife and children, ameliorating their poor financial condition. The master hardly ever entered into any dialogue or discussion with his servant; he either gave commands or listened to appeals. When doubtful of his servant's character, he severed ties by withdrawing affective warmth but giving extra money.

CONCLUSION

In the late nineteenth century, the servant figure emerges in the Hindi literary sphere within the larger (upper-caste, middle-class) nationalist discursive project of refashioning the realm of home. Existing scholarship has suggested that in the reformist endeavour the literary reorganisation of domestic space takes place along the lines of gender, but what needs to be considered is the fact that this reorganisation was also overwritten by the mistress–maid relationship. The mistress–maid relationship is carved out across genres and educational manuals as well as novels in the nineteenth century or in graphic satire, sketches or short stories in the early part of the twentieth century. Even if marginal, the class of maidservants, as shown in the case of cartoons, had a constitutive and unsettling presence in the nationalist-reformist discourse on the Indian household. There was a variety of ways in which class relations in the household were portrayed. The literature dealing with normative or stock characters, for example, educational manuals, prescribed a non-affective and impersonal relationship between the housemaster and servants of lower social status

and potentially suspicious character. The novels dealing in detail with ideal domestic servants showed the crafting of the class relationship in the idiom of care and affect. Hence, the baḍī dāi of early novels was not just another waged servant, she was the caretaker of her master's family and upholder of its moral and cultural axis. This extra-economic moral familial status of the senior maid, which was crafted in the register of affection and care, however, came at a cost to her individual self. Her own identity, her life beyond the confines of master's household, remained insignificant in literary representation. The new literary agenda of representing the subaltern brought a shift in the depiction of domestic servants in Hindi literature in the 1930s and added another dimension to representational practice. While it provided a counter-narrative to the class bias visible in the contiguous genre of advice manuals, it rescued and used the class question to broaden the horizon of the (Hindu) middle-class nationalist imagination. It underlined the class contradiction of reformist nationalism and its tragic consequences for the underclass. Furthermore, it elevated servants as morally superior humans worthy of being literary heroes, and it delineated the individuality of domestic servants. The story of a servant was no longer about his life in the master's household alone. It was now a story of his many lives: one as servant in the workplace and another as householder, or one of her class and another of her gender; yet a servant's caste identity was subsumed in the capacious narrative of class or gender injustice. Such sketches and stories, moreover, also attempted to provide their own gloss to the master–servant relationship. The idiom of care and affect was not simply pitched against relationships marked by language of distancing and indifference. Both could be deployed simultaneously to explore the complex and hierarchical nature of human relationships.