

Role of hierarchies of race and gender in the 19th century british empire

[History](#), [Empires](#)



What role did hierarchies of race and gender play in the British Empire in the nineteenth century?

By the end of the nineteenth century, the British Empire comprised of nearly one-quarter of the world's land surface and more than one-quarter of its total population.[1]Previously, a United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland had been established and now Britain was looking outward, creating a continuation of Empire at home, abroad.[2]Britain began by establishing overseas colonies in the sixteenth century and by 1783, it had stretched to colonies in America and the West Indies.[3]This has been described as the first phase of the British Empire, which came to an end with the American Revolution. The second phase began in the nineteenth century, focusing on India, as well as "white colonies" in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.[4]Historians such as Edward Said argue that this was a result of nationalism and racism, an effort to dominate indigenous peoples.[5]On the other hand, the Industrial Revolution brought changes to technology which transformed the relationship between Britain and the colonies, creating a feeling of moral superiority towards indigenous peoples. This "Second Empire" was a worldwide entity, comprising of colonies, protectorates and other territories and has been described as "the empire on which the sun never sets." As the size of the Empire increased, so did concerns about control over the newly established "Greater Britain".[6]Therefore, hierarchies of race and gender played a pivotal role, specifically in shaping and constructing ideas of "otherness" at home and abroad.

Queen Victoria began her reign in 1837, the effigy of Empire, she was made Empress of India by Benjamin Disraeli in 1876.[7]The very idea of a Victorian England bred nationalist sentiment and therefore acted as an enabler for Empire, promoting British ideologies and outlining ideas of the Orient.

Orientalism has been described by Edward Said as “ a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘ the Orient’ and ‘ the Occident’ . Thus many...have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories...”[8]At home, in Victorian England, the national identity soon began to merge into an imperial one, with radical racial thinking at the forefront of the minds of many British imperialists. This new British identity of a “ distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority” emerged at home and began to solidify throughout the empire.[9]Likewise, in the nineteenth century, theories such as Social Darwinism encouraged ideas of the Orient, being described as one of the “ key ingredients in the cultural ethos that spawned expansionist sentiment.” Specifically, these thoughts and ideas were directed toward colonial races, and as a result, colonial rule was justified. The British believed that through colonisation and a process of Enlightenment there would be a “ social uplift” across the world.[10]

Coinciding with this new identity were new definitions of masculinity and femininity. Within the Victorian society, evolving gender values were underpinned into everyday life through the media and the patriarchy. The male ideal of “ nobleness, bravery and an adventurous spirit” penetrated British society and expanded into the empire which has been referred to as a

“ playground to exhibit this new masculine identity...” This British display of dominance has been argued as a result of a “ lacking sense of male purpose” in England due to a lesser number of wars than the Georgian era. [11]Similarly, the role of women in society was altered, with a new emphasis on their domestic role at home, and a responsibility to model the superiority of European life, in the Empire.[12]Women within British society were wives and mothers, and this ideal of domesticity was to be transferred across the Empire to sow the seeds of civilisation. As the caretakers of English society, the role of women within the Empire was of the same nature. This is in contrast to the role of indigenous women who were often viewed as objects of sexual desire.[13]Despite the important female role within the Empire they remained the “ inferior sex within the superior race.”[14]With the thoughts of hierarchies of race ingrained into British society, radicalised opinion of racial and cognitive superiority over the non-whites was easily transported across the empire, in the same fashion as the movement of goods. Therefore, the moulding of the British imperialists mind was defined by two characteristics, race and gender, in a synchronised process which resulted into dominance over “ despotic” nations.

The role of hierarchies of race and gender played pivotal roles in constructing British perceptions of “ non-white otherness” particularly in India. India epitomised the second phase of the British Empire, beginning in Bengal and stretching east of the Suez from Aden to Burma, creating a “ Greater India”.[15]Often, it is coined as the “ centre of a miniempire” and this is where Britain began its civilising mission.[16]In contrast to Britain,

dominated by Christianity, India had a majority Hindu population which imperialists believed “ had irreparably decayed.”[17]This paved the way for the English belief that the Indians were now ready to receive British culture despite their “ alien race and religion.”[18]The role of hierarchies of race and gender is particularly evident in India, when demonstrating lower levels of civilisation, with T. B. Macaulay stating, the “ organisation of the Bengali is feeble even to effeminacy.” The characteristics which epitomised British masculinity, “ courage, independence, veracity,” were supposedly lacking in the Bengali male, confirming the racial hierarchy which the British underpinned their mission on.[19]This set about the process of “ Englishing” the Indians through teaching the English language and English literature.[20]

Furthermore, Britain enforced culturally intrusive legislation upon India in a bid for control. Perhaps the most notorious is William Bentinck’s proposal to ban the practice of Suttee in 1829. Suttee is “ the practice of a wife’s self-immolation on her husband’s funeral pyre”, a Hindu practice which emphasises short-term pain rather than the long-term pain of widowhood. [21]Christians saw this as uncivilised and as Governor General of India, Bentinck began the process of outlawing it, stating, “ I now have the happiness of believing that the course which I have adopted has been the means of saving many poor, infatuated, or intoxicated, females from destruction.”[22]Through this statement, it is evident that Bentinck believed he was cognitively superior than the Indians, outlawing a practice which he thought women were walking into lightly. This was an intrusion upon religious practices, signifying the superiority the British felt over the native

population. Similarly, inter-racial relations between western men and native women were common in India, reinforcing the roles of hierarchies of race and gender within the British Empire. When the relationships took their natural course and children were involved, the issue of citizenship highlighted the issue of gender and racial hierarchies. The number of citizens granted British status was limited in order to “protect the whiteness” of its citizens and so the native companions were often neglected, whilst their children were Anglicised.[23]The Caste system in India was also useful in reinforcing the roles of racial and gender hierarchies in the British Empire in the nineteenth century. The Caste system is defined as “the division of Hindu society into four major hereditary classes” which shapes nearly every facet of Indian life.[24]Unlike the British class system, the Caste system does not allow for movement into other divisions, whether they be higher or lower. This was mostly evident in the Raj, in which Britain placed native Indians into administrative roles. The British, therefore, contradict themselves, as this counteracts the idea of indigenous men being ill-fit or lacking the capacity to lead, challenging the gendered racial conceptions previously outlined.

Whilst colonising Australia, hierarchies of race and gender played a significant role in establishing a “white Australia ideal” and reinforcing ideas of superiority over the aboriginal Australian.[25]The British settlers felt the importance of highlighting the distinctions between race and gender, ingraining the idea of aboriginal “savages” into society.[26]Above all, women in British society were mothers and wives, this ideal of domesticity was often projected onto the indigenous peoples and this was also done in

Australia. Aboriginal women and girls were often seen as the cause of “immortality and vice” and it was insisted upon that these “half-caste women and girls” should learn the ways of a respectable colonial woman.[27] An example of British thoughts of superiority being entrenched into aboriginal Australia is through the “breeding out the colour.”[28] This was the idea that British imperial men would impregnate native Australian women in order to produce lighter-skinned children.[29] This was often the result of sexual assault and to the people of Australia, this exploitation of women was far from the civilising mission which the British portrayed.[30] The genuine belief by the colonisers that they were racially and evolutionary superior to the indigenous populations made way for hierarchies of race and gender to impact on the empire's structure. The commitment to the “purification of Australia” was a policy which included the extinction of full-blooded Aborigines and eventually, those considered “half-caste.”[31] This system was a reoccurring theme. Like in India, the offspring from these mixed-race relationships were often re-socialised into the British settler colonies, reinforcing the principle of a “white Australia” within two to three generations.[32]

Within the nineteenth century, hierarchies of race and gender played an immense role in British society. This was evident throughout all aspects of life, including the home, school, work and the media. It is evident from the examples shown specifically in India and Australia that the role of hierarchies of race and gender underpinned every aspect of imperial life. Race and gender played equal roles within the empire, the whites over non-whites and

men over women. This created a feeling of superiority between white men and non-white men, although this was not exclusive and did affect non-white women and white women, however in different ways. The women's rights movement began in the nineteenth century, paving the way for women to be equal, rather than the inferior sex. This sparked debate surrounding the rights of those who were from colonised countries. Although it is impossible to understand whether this was an accidental assumption of hierarchies through a process of enlightenment or if it was used as a tool in the construction of empire in order to repress those who were being colonised, it is clearly evident that their role was to aid in the expansion of the British empire.

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[3]Kumar, “ The British Empire,” 322.

[4]Kumar, “ The British Empire,” 322.

[5]Edward Said, “ Introduction,” in *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978), 16.

[6]Kumar, “ The British Empire,” 319.

[7]Kumar, “ The British Empire,” 328.

[8]Said, “ Introduction,” 10.

[9]Edward Said, “ Knowing the Oriental,” in *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978), 50.

[10]Dorothy K. Stein, “ Women to Burn: Suttee as a Normative Institution,” *Signs* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1978): 258.

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[16]Kumar, " The British Empire," 328.

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[28]Smithers, “ The Evolution of White Australia,” 259.

[29]Smithers, “ The Evolution of White Australia,” 259.

[30]Smithers, “ The Evolution of White Australia,” 262.

[31]Smithers, “ The Evolution of White Australia,” 250-251.

[32]Smithers, “ The Evolution of White Australia,” 246.