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Nautch Girls: Cultural Power and Counterflow in the Long Nineteenth Century

by

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Nautch Girls: Cultural Power and Counterflow in the Long Nineteenth Century

Thesis Abstract–Idaho State University (2023)

The British Empire created powerful cultural intimacies and interactions which were the inevitable result of colonizers interacting with the colonized. British dominion over the subcontinent of India brought them into contact with a group known as the nautch girls. The nautch girls were the ultimate in performance entertainment and cultural showmanship that were purveyed in a variety of South Asian empires. The cultural intimacies between colonizer and colonized resulted in a spectacular counterflow to the empire. Utilizing the methodologies of colonial discourse theory, subaltern studies, critical analysis, and close reading, this thesis examines and explores the nautch girls and how they continually showed the inherent paradoxes and internal contradictions of the British Empire through their agency and soft power. I will utilize critical analysis in uniting historiographic and qualitative case studies to analyze and expose the potent subaltern nautch girl as a serious distortion of power within the British Empire.

Key Words: nautch girls, agency, counterflow, subaltern

Introduction

The British Empire envisioned themselves as an administrative and cultural apex of supremacy over a vast cross-section of the world and its peoples.¹ The empire used its cultural power and prowess to exert its control and supremacy over the colonized. The power of the empire lay in more than merely portraying itself as the “most beneficial” empire, it lay in establishing a cultural superiority that grounded its colonized subjects and worked to overawe them with both its modernity and imposed supremacy.² Historians such as Bernard Porter “tend to see [the] empire’s presence in the culture as a constructed presence.”³ Within this cultural structure of “superiority” that was cast over colonial subjects, there was a complex intersection of race, religion, gender, and elitism between the colonizers and the subaltern.⁴ The cultural framework of imperial power projection was questioned when the subalterns’ agency worked to cast doubt on the idea of supremacy.⁵

Using the nautch girls as a lens to study the British Empire allows us to understand how different subaltern groups expressed their agency and affected imperial power structures. Whilst

¹ Kate Fullagar, “‘Savages that are among us’: Mai, Bennelong, and British Imperial Culture, 1774-1795,” *The Eighteenth Century* 49, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 225. Fullagar’s entire work as well as significant areas of Richard Price’s (quoted below) are interpreted and translated in my own language in this opening statement. That imperial British culture had “shifted in the 1780s was not new.” Both Fullagar and Price are put into conversation with this statement. Fullagar in the sense that there was indeed an imperial culture foisting itself upon the colonized, and that in an extension of the British Imperial culture agents were careful to “lay on every show of politeness and cultural excellence...” (Fullagar, 219). With Price, “The law was among the first artifacts of British culture colonizers introduced to the indigenes. It was through the law that British authority was exercised; British culture knew no other way.” (Price, *One Big Thing*, 627, cited below). Both essays are an attempt to come to grips with just how the imperial British culture plays out in the action of instilling supremacy and ultimately ruling over a colonized people. In putting together these and other sources, relevance of the imperial culture as a form of control over non-native subjects is paramount. This is discussed in a more theoretical sense in the coming pages.

² Stephen Sears, *The British Empire* (United States: New York American Heritage, 1973), 6.

³ Richard Price, “One Big Thing: Britain, Its Empire, and Their Imperial Culture,” *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 3 (2006): 619.

⁴ The term “subaltern” in this thesis is utilized in the context of postcolonial theory; those of a supposed lower class or a group that was displaced. This term will be defined further in the ‘Agency and Subaltern’ section of this chapter.

⁵ See ‘Agency and Subaltern’ section for further discussion as to how I employ and define this term.

having many qualities and being able to be classified as subaltern, the nautch girls truly stood apart due to their inherent socio-cultural power.⁶ In furthering knowledge of the depth and source of their power, and the ways it was able to manifest, critical understanding can be gained as to how the nautch girls became an extremely potent source of stress for the British Empire, one that could reveal hidden paradoxes and anxieties. The nautch girls are important to the issues of imperial culture and gender history in that they were subaltern in very visible ways –brown and female– but were also simultaneously and paradoxically strong.

In this thesis, I use the case of the nautch girls and their engagements with the British Empire to expose the inherent paradoxes (such as the idea of the beneficence of empire), internal contradictions, and anxieties of the British Empire. The nautch girls (of various types) of the Indian subcontinent stood as a cultural artifact whose considerable agency visibly upset and undermined the idea of supremacy as well as various aspects of the empire's cultural framework. Their agency would eventually lead to an anti-nautch movement being formed in an attempt by the empire to exterminate the nautch girls and their cultural power, as it visibly upset colonial ideas of superiority.⁷ The cultural counterflow of the powerful nautch girls raised questions both in the subcontinent and back in the metropole, as to the validity of the ideals and justifications touted by the empire for colonization.⁸

⁶ Further discussion of the dynamics of the nautch girls, as well as their historical power structure and an in detail definition of them will be presented in chapter 1, which also discusses the apparent dichotomy of having significant power and still being subaltern.

⁷ Spearheaded by western education and Christian missionaries in the 1890s, the anti-nautch movement represented a conscious effort to cast the nautch girls as vulgar, and to stigmatize them as a negative aspect of colonized culture. They would eventually be designated as prostitutes to further their extirpation.

⁸ Counterflow in this thesis denotes more than just the physical presence of Indian bodies in Britain. There was a cultural magnitude that flowed from the nautch girls back to the metropole; both via their bodies being physically present there, as well as through discussions in newspapers and appropriation like plays and theater shows. In this sense, the idea of the nautch girl, and all they represent, forced a conversation throughout the empire (but importantly back in the metropole) as to the validity of colonizer superiority.

Contextual Setting

The nautch girls and the differing groups that the term encompassed, never identified themselves as “nautch”. The term nautch girl was a colonial definition and was in itself an attempt to ambiguate and make unimportant a variety of differing groups simultaneously. Those groups, lumped into the colonial version of the term nautch girl, included but were not limited to the *devadasis*, the *tawaif*, religious functionaries, professional artists, entertainers, transient performers, and even keepers of the “morals, manners, and distinctiveness of Lucknow culture and society.”⁹ These groups could vary significantly by function, religion, and purpose, and this all encompassing moniker helped the British to silence important distinguishing aspects to mute their cultural significance or even associate certain coveted courtesans with groups commonly known for prostitution. Of the various groups of who would be termed nautch girls, even within a single location such as Lucknow, there flourished the “most coveted and cultured tawaif”, being associated by the term nautch girl with the Kanchanis or “common bazaar prostitute.”¹⁰ Contemporary historians such as Abdul Haleem Sharar would commonly refer to these various categories as common prostitutes, though the tawaif were “the superior class of singers and dancers or courtesans...”¹¹ The complexities of the various types of nautch girls, typically misunderstood by western authors and travelers, are necessarily simplified by such a term. This then created an ambiguous term to which varying negative connotations could be easily ascribed, its influence and reach only being enhanced as the term covered the entirety of India. The reach of this term also grouped the varying religious categories and castes together, creating an

⁹ Veena Talwar Oldenburg, “Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow,” *Feminist Studies* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 263.

¹⁰ Vijay Prakash Singh, “From Nautch Girl to Tawaif: The Lucknow Courtesan in Transition,” *South Asian Review* 35, no. 2 (2014): 177.

¹¹ Singh, 177.

amorphous idea of what a nautch girl should be, whilst simultaneously disempowering those cultural facets that made up the nautch girls' prowess.

Fully recognizing that “nautch girls” was a stereotypical term used by the administrators of the empire and was meant to undermine them, I consciously use this term to be honest and reflective of how the term appears in the archives utilized. The negative aspects of the moniker are overshadowed by the great many groups that can be ascribed as nautch girls. The term “nautch” in Sanskrit and Dravidian refers to dance, and erases the specific and varied skills this community of artisans portrayed on myriad stages:

...Nautch girls originally entertained local rulers. They were first and foremost singers, and used dance to make the emotional, romantic lyrics of their songs more expressive. Officers of the British East India Company stationed in India were introduced to the nautch tradition by ruling nawabs when invited as guests to their palaces, but they soon introduced Indian dance as entertainment in their own homes.¹²

By making “nautch” so all encompassing, it besmirched and belittled critical social groups and distinctions. In addition, the usage of the term “girls” was deliberately infantilizing and suggestive of how the British Empire wished this group to be perceived: as incapable of adult action and thought. The term “girl” was also a reinforcement of the need for the “benevolence” of the empire. It was in the empire’s best interest to portray these subaltern women as needing their help and beneficence. These nautch girls were not only culturally powerful, but financially powerful as well: “As if it was not surprising enough to find women in the tax records, it was even more remarkable that they were in the highest tax bracket, with the largest individual incomes of any in the city.”¹³ As such, the colonial empire would eventually need to subvert the position of the nautch girls, so as to reinforce and institutionalize their own

¹² Marianne A. Yule, “Indian Dancers by Arthur Hopkins (1848-1930),” *The British Art Journal* 19, no. 3 (Winter 2018/2019): 72.

¹³ Oldenburg, “Lifestyle as Resistance,” 259.

cultural superiority. Critically, this thesis does not explore how the anti-nautch movement arose, but rather why it was necessary for the empire to mobilize against the nautch girls.

According to Pran Nevile, traditionally, Indian dance is a display of grace in motion and rhythm for the glorification of the gods.¹⁴ The Sanskrit treatise on performing arts, the *Natya Shastra* “analyses the movements of every part of the human frame from head to toe.”¹⁵ Working through these highly analyzed and measured movements, the dancers portrayed different emotions, aspects or ideas.¹⁶ With the influx of different cultural influences, and especially that of the Mughals bringing the Kathak dance form, the nautch dances were suffused with different techniques and footwork. These dances are a measure of skill as well as the “flowing drapery, the well defined form, and varying measure of the nymph...”¹⁷ While there were several socio-cultural, economic and even political purposes of these dances, one of the most socially prominent purposes was to combine these various aspects to produce a “particular emotion or sentiment.”¹⁸

The term “cultural artifact” warrants definition as to what it entails in this thesis. Richard Price, British and social historian, attempted to describe what is the true font of power in terms of an empire’s ability to control land, people, or both: “In the new imperial history, power is treated largely as a cultural artifact.”¹⁹ This more recent cultural term is a shift from what was typically seen as a more traditional framework resulting in power over a land or people. More modern imperial history is less interested in the imperial systems that are traditionally thought of as holding power, such as political or economical power; histories that largely ignored or minimized the effect of cultural and gendered power structures. By attempting to understand

¹⁴ Pran Nevile, *Nautch Girls of the Raj* (India: Penguin Books India, 1996), 47.

¹⁵ Nevile, 47.

¹⁶ Nevile, 47.

¹⁷ Nevile, 53.

¹⁸ Nevile, 47.

¹⁹ Price, 619.

imperial power as a discrete expression of a cultural and gendered framework, underlying and inherent weaknesses, and the fragility of an empire can be understood.

Historians like Bill Nasson do not abjure the sense of cultural power altogether. Nasson (in using Robert Ross) in his study of British cultural imperialism in South Africa, still indicates that as part of the power structure that is upholding the various threads required to sustain such an entity, there was a “potency of nineteenth-century British cultural imperialism,” that reflects the “underlying values and influential pull...of imperial creed.”²⁰ Much has been made, in traditional imperial histories, of a “national consciousness” that represented the zeitgeist of an era that was specifically focused on a particular people or power.²¹ This was a function of cultural power or—more accurately—perceived cultural power. The study of imperial culture in the realm of the everyday, can result in the discovery of latent social power structures and frameworks of control that can provide a new conceptual apparatus for the informed to view and understand imperial power as a function of culture.

The absolute vitalness of cultural power as a function of the imperial framework of control can perhaps be best illustrated by Lee Kuan Yew. Acknowledging the fact that Lee Kuan Yew and Singapore were not necessarily in direct socio-political links with British India, parallels exist between the two colonized cultures. Whilst Yew and his important observations of British imperial culture postscript the time period discussed in this thesis, they are nonetheless illustrations of how cultural power was perceived by those who were colonized. Further, the fact that it is more modern perhaps lends this critical observation a more easily digestible temporal viewpoint. Yew and his interpretation of colonization represented a colonized view of

²⁰ Bill Nasson, “Why They Fought: Black Cape Colonists and Imperial Wars, 1899-1918,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 37, no. 1 (2004): 59.

²¹ Niall Ferguson’s *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the lessons for Global Power* offers multiple, more traditional empire lenses through which to discover the zeitgeist or as to how the national consciousness of the empire was pushing certain ideas (or fallacies). Specifically in the early 1800s Ferguson casts it as a “clash of civilizations” (114) with heavy religious justification.

colonialism in its final form. Some may argue that Yew and his views represented a take on the final form of the British empire, and are therefore not applicable to the version that exists within the timeframe this thesis is aimed at. I would argue that what Yew has to say about imperial projection of superior culture, being vital to imperial control and domination of the colonized, is exactly applicable across the breadth of the empire in both geographical and temporal terms:

The superior status of the British government and society was simply a fact of life. After all, they were the greatest people in the world. They had the biggest empire that history had ever known, stretching over all time zones, across all four oceans and five continents. We learnt that in history lessons at school...I was brought up by my parents and grandparents to accept that this was the natural order of things.²²

This phrase from Yew –“greatest people in the world”– is illustrative of just how important perceived cultural power was for the colonizer.²³ Having the colonized view the colonizer as not just superior, but the greatest people in the world, formed a greater control over the colonized. The colonizer “greatness” was a viewpoint that was instilled upon the colonized in order to yield vital fruit to the empire in terms of lessening the amount of rebellions, imparting greater prestige, increased deference from the colonized, and perhaps most importantly shaped the colonized view of the world. Yew’s viewpoint of the world was shifted and tilted by the lens in which he was taught the cultural superiority of the British Empire. Naturally, and by imperial design, this inculcated a type of subservient culture and helped to shift the colonized knowledge formations into something else; different than before with a more deferential and positive viewpoint towards the colonizer. As such, how imperial culture was perceived, no matter the temporal or geographical location, was of critical importance towards stability and longevity. However whilst important in making the imperial foundation strong at its core, reliance on the perception of cultural power opened up weaknesses in the form of preexisting or preeminent

²² Francis Pike, *Hirohito's War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 317.

²³ Pike, 317.

forms of cultural power that both predated the colonizer, and had the ability to usurp imperial cultural supremacy.

A cultural artifact, therefore, is something or someone that functioned as a form of power or had power within a culture. Kate Fullagar's work is instructive on this point; however, the scope is expanded here. From Fullagar, differences or perceived "otherness" had become linked with a lack of simplicity of what can be considered customs or "cultural facts".²⁴ In other words, the nebulous description of what could engender power within a culture may simply be something (an object or a person) that merely needed to exist, or something that was seen as powerful in and of itself. Engendered power however, could change to overt power or soft power of the "other" or the subaltern, with a group such as the nautch girls. As will be discussed and expanded later, the nautch girls (as well as gendered ideas of power in India) existed well before the British empire came to control India. What distinguished the nautch girls from many (if not all) other subaltern groups in this theater was their overt power and prowess as a function of the nautch girls themselves being a potent cultural artifact. That is to say, as a function of their place in a cultural and gendered history, the nautch girls were closely aligned with power or ideas of cultural power, sometimes ostentatiously so. The nautch girls manifested powerful, gendered agency merely by being their specific and unique cultural artifact, as well as by their prowess. This artifact, as we shall see, changed over time and gathered to itself even more forms of soft power.

As the nautch girls could be seen as a cultural artifact, this then introduced overt female-gendered power into the highly patriarchal imperial framework. Durba Ghosh's work in *Sex and the family in colonial India* is highly illustrative of the fact that gendered analysis can add new and previously unexplored aspects as to the cultural order and framework of the British

²⁴ Fullagar, 213.

imperial system.²⁵ The nautch girls added in a curious and rare lens to this gendered viewpoint: one of visible superiority. If the British empire can be analyzed and viewed as a gendered, cultural construct then the perception of the power that it represented could possibly flow both ways. Thus, via the lens of the powerful cultural artifact that was the nautch girls, underlying and undiscovered aspects of the British imperial framework, such as imperial anxieties, can be revealed and understood.

Further adding to the historical interest and viability of the study of the nautch girls, is the fact that they represented a unique cultural and gendered group that could exercise extreme agency. In addition, their highly visible cultural status and soft power as well as their gender, marked them as a group that, through intense study and critical analysis, had many viable intersections throughout British imperial history. Their proximity and relationship with perceived power, education, and wealth necessarily meant that their own connecting strands to the fabric of the empire were both broad and deep. Gayatri Spivak's shift of the subject (changing the subject of focus from the Empire to the subaltern) is extraordinarily useful in the case of the nautch girls due to their initial status in the imperial pecking order. Their movements and intersections within the empire can reveal a great deal in terms of epistemological formations, the framework of power as the British understood it, and the stressors and motivations of those that lived within such an imperial construct.

Literature Review

The nautch girls have been historically reviled in much of modern writings (20th century and onward). This was a result of the anti-nautch movement as well as gender bias. Nevile Prasad

²⁵ Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the family in colonial India: the making of empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

perhaps the most visible champion to set the interpretation of the nautch girls, as history saw them, in a more accurate light. Rather than merely focusing on the end result of the anti-nautch movement, Nevile Pran “ventured to retrieve the legendary Indian Dancing girl from 150 years of ignominy to which hypocritical social values had consigned her.”²⁶ Other works exist on the nautch girls before Pran, however his study of them is one of the more widespread interpretations. Pran also offers a quick and useful approach as to the validity of the cultural status of the various groups that make up who would become the nautch girls.

Veena Talwar Oldenburg predates Pran, and offers a more academic approach. Whilst Pran offers a broad history in which the nautch girls take part, Oldenburg’s work is much more specific. Oldenburg specifically targets the *tawaif* (one of the many groups that will be lumped in with the term nautch girl) courtesans of Lucknow. Oldenburg specifically focuses on gender, social order, as well as the *tawaif* and their “compelling role in politics.”²⁷ Oldenburg hints at what will be expanded upon later in this work, in that these “courtesans”, whether the ruling powers of the Mughals or British knew at the time, formed a female elite. Oldenburg’s scope is narrow geographically, but her general analysis and interpretation of these Lucknow nautch girls was, at the time she wrote it, unique. These *tawaif* formed an inversion of society with blatant favoring of females over males. In this thesis I seek to expand her arguments in terms of both geography and applicability with respect to the many groups that will be lumped together in the term “nautch girls”.

Shweta Sachdeva parallels Oldenburg in that there is significant focus on the *tawaif* in Lucknow and their apparent manifest self-representation.²⁸ Sachdeva expands upon Oldenburg's

²⁶ John Lall, “Of nautch girls and princelings,” review of *Nautch Girls of India* by Pran Nevile, *India International Centre Quarterly* 25, no. 2/3 (Summer 1998): 171.

²⁷ Oldenburg, “Lifestyle as Resistance,” 262.

²⁸ Shweta Sachdeva, “In search of the Tawa’if in history: courtesans, nautch girls and celebrity entertainers in India” (PhD diss., University of London, 2008).

work portraying their history as a function of both literary and visual representations. Sachdeva leans upon Stephen Greenblatt's theoretical conceptions of self in an attempt to disentangle the *tawaif* in regards to the historical quagmire the various nautch groups found themselves in. Importantly, Sachdeva seeks to take the basis of Oldenburg's work, and put it into conversation with more modern conceptions of agency, imagery, and identity.

Charn Jagpal's excellent work on the nautch girls offers critical analysis of a very specific time period while utilizing the broad definition of what would be considered a nautch girl (*tawaifs & devadasis*).²⁹ Jagpal is largely concerned with the literary turn of the end of the 19th century, in which British literature exhibits anxieties and fear, as well as an attraction, to the communities of the nautch girls. Jagpal utilizes these works and puts the nautch into conversation with imperial feminist ideas and promotional materials, whilst seeking to reconcile the paradox that the nautch girls create. Jagpal's interpretation of the imperial reaction offers a well-founded attempt to read the encounters between the imperial feminine culture and Indian women, and discern the proper underlying currents of feminist hierarchies.

Zara Barlas offers a larger view in terms of artistry and conceptualization with regards to where the nautch girls "fit".³⁰ Barlas confidently and correctly situates this temporal location as one of "dramatic shifts". Barlas' argument is that works of art tend to represent the thinkings of a particular culture or society and are valuable historically far beyond that of merely "works of art". The long nineteenth century arc encapsulates ideas from the enlightenment, ideas about imperialism and revolution, as well as cultural and political zeitgeists. Utilizing their artistry as a lens, and with proper examination, historians can discern larger meanings and causes as to the

²⁹ Charn Kamal Kaur Jagpal, "I Mean to Win': The Nautch Girl and Imperial Feminism at the Fin de Siecle" (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2011), 5.

³⁰ Zara Barlas, "The Art of Imperial Entanglements: Nautch Girls on the British Canvas and Stage in the Long Nineteenth Century" (PhD diss., Heidelberg University, 2018).

various entanglements of this era. Drawing greatly from ideas in Edward Said's work *Culture and Imperialism* (which this thesis will as well), Barlas analyzes and distinguishes the nautch girl as an "enigma" of both visual and musical art as they moved closely with ideas central to imperialism.

The work presented in this thesis closely intersects with Grace Howard's work on nautch girls, *devadasis*, *tawaifs*, and sex-work.³¹ Howard specifically "explores the shifts in British perceptions of Indian women, and the impact this had on imperial discourses". Howard deftly utilizes the various groups that compose the nautch girls moniker, and attempts to show them as both the fundamental onset of British imperial perceptions of the Indian female, as well as how the nautch girls can describe and illustrate the changing British perceptions about their own power in India. While contiguous, I will support and prove aspects of Howard's work with different sources, as well as change the attention given to the various aspects of the nautch. Whilst Howard specifically omits the anti-nautch movement from the temporal period in discussion, this thesis will include it. In addition, this thesis seeks to track the nautch girls and their varying perceptions via the British empire as a function of that empire in terms of power, culture, and control. That is, through paradoxical mimicry, the British empire was shown to be weak and vulnerable to the cultural artifact that the nautch girls represent, to such a degree that a cultural reaction from the colonizer is forced due to the manifest power of the subaltern. Howard's excellent work is contained largely to a gendered discourse, while this thesis will explore the epistemological power formation that was the nautch girls, and their influence and

³¹ Grace E. S. Howard, "Courtesans in Colonial India: Representations of British Power through Understands of Nautch-Girls, Devadasis, Tawa'ifs, and Sex-Work, c. 1750-1883," (master's thesis, University of Guelph, 2019).

impact across a wide breadth of both imperial localities and culture, as well as their having stood specifically in opposition the idea of the “benevolence” of empire.

Barbara Andaya’s work with concubines, courtly women, and temporary wives in Southeast Asia features women with comparable cultural influences as that of the nautch girls. Throughlines existed between these other palatial women and their sources of power, european response, and cultural markers, and those of the nautch girls. In Southeast Asia, the apparent “femaleness” of certain courts was “by no means exceptional.”³² Throughout the entire area there were, “older ideas that the maintenance of many women increased male status...”³³ The nautch girls echoed this female ability to “increase status”. As will be discussed later, this is a type of power that is wholly an aberration within the epistemological framework of the British Empire. Direct and consequential throughlines exist between her Southeast Asian subjects and the nautch girls, as Anadaya points out Southeast Asian palatial women, in particular senior women, were “recognized experts” and “their profound knowledge of history, genealogy, and custom meant that their opinion was commonly sought on a range of matters concerned with correct protocol.”³⁴ Discussed later in this thesis, this aspect of “correctness” would be an important contemporary interpretation of the applicability of cultural power.

While the nautch girls are becoming more well known for their unique and interesting aspects as a subaltern in the British Empire, as well as for what they can show when studied as the subject, much is left to be done in order to understand the myriad ways in which such a paradoxically strong subaltern can illuminate the British empire to be so paradoxically weak. It is important to understand that not only are they a separate social group (in all iterations), but their

³² Barbara Watson Andaya, “Women and the Performance of Power in Early Modern Southeast Asia,” in *Servants of the Dynasty: Palace Women in World History*, ed. Anne Walthall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 23.

³³ Anadaya, 23.

³⁴ Anadaya, 38.

engagement with other groups and imperial authority represents an intersection of many moving parts. Like light refracting through prism, each wavelength has a different visible aspect as it relates to the subject as a whole. This thesis will attempt to add a broad yet distinct lens that can push forward the literature and understanding of agency and the subaltern. Through studying the nautch girls, the varying intensities and intersections of gender, law, class politics, internal anxieties, and cultural counterflow of empire can be revealed. Much like the refracting light, I wish to add another lens or viewpoint to the prism of the nautch girls, one that focuses on their cultural power and usurpation by the British, as well as where those intersections take the issues and various facets of their prowess in relation to the colonizer.

Contextualizing Use of the Terms: Agency, Subaltern, Piety, Prowess

The term “agency” requires specificity in terms of usage, definition, and placement, as well as academic context. Agency can be varied as to its usage and meaning even within certain geographical and temporal locations. African agency of the 1700s may not necessarily correspond to Indian agency of the same time. The term can also exist as a function of labor, political, cultural framework, or even nationalism. Agency can also be a function of gender in relation to how positions of authority mention or react to perceived notions of gender roles within their specific context.³⁵ Agency utilized in this thesis refers to an action by a particular person or group that is emblematic of their social, economic, or administrative power especially in relation to that person or group being subaltern in category. Further, the expression of this contradiction of agency, especially when expressed by the subaltern, creates an unrecognized

³⁵ Arunima Datta, *Fleeting Agencies: A Social History of Indian Coolie Women in British Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 1-2.

(and possibly dangerous) contradiction which valorizes and signals the concrete experience of the oppressed.³⁶

Typically, agency can be thought of as “moments of agency [or action] and acts of survivance within extended periods of exploitation and subjugation.”³⁷ This is largely how most subaltern acts of agency can be understood: as moments. Derivations of actions that go against the cultural framework that are recognizable by colonial subjugators as deviant. In addition, “situational agency” can be utilized to understand ways that the subaltern are forced to navigate the various complexities of gender, race, class, etc.³⁸ The nautch girls certainly possessed these forms of agency; however, they also possessed something more unique. The nautch girls and the cultural artifact that they represented, also expressed their agency in a significant way merely by their existence alone. As such, when agency is utilized in this thesis, it means all the various typical actions that make up a more common definition of agency, but it may also be referring to the unique and powerful agency that the nautch girls exuded merely by being a nautch girl. As will be discussed later, the nautch girls possessed a further unique form of agency that very nearly approached or approximated hard power in their ability to denote “correctness of action”.

“Subaltern” requires definition and placement as well, both within the context of how it is used in this thesis, as well as to the various contexts and meanings that may or may not apply to its usage here. Ranajit Guha has vast influence upon any mention of subaltern, and much of what will be discussed in this work bears his mark. Complexities that are involved in utilizing subaltern studies correctly are numerous; however, they are derived from an absolute need to recognize components of a society that are largely, “left out in the cold by elitist studies of

³⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. By Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 69.

³⁷ Datta, *Fleeting Agencies*, 2-3.

³⁸ Datta, *Fleeting Agencies*, 3.

politics.”³⁹ Such differences, especially when accounting for the drudgery of elitist politics, allows for the resultant illumination of something much more complex than initially thought. Of particular importance is the “invidious hierarchization of South Asian culture into ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ levels, or into degrees of ‘backwardness’.”⁴⁰ Guha importantly points out that these prior histories were hidden from view by both the colonizer and academia as they challenge a tradition, in both cases, complicit to imperialism.

Some scholars, such as Partha Chatterjee, denote subaltern studies as still needing significant amounts of address. Chatterjee points out that some theorists and historians, such as Guha, lay exclusive claim in a temporal sense to subaltern studies, stating that Guha claims that the project belongs to “our time,” due the common anxiety of the *Midnight’s Children* born since India’s independence.⁴¹ While Guha’s perspective on subaltern theories may have been overly influenced, by his own admission by his own time period, Chatterjee asserts that many questions are still to be answered in the form of new projects and viewpoints. Chatterjee’s assertion is reinforced by theorizing from Gramsci, in that political modernity itself is a function of subalternization.⁴² Experiences of those that fall into the category of subaltern can be seen as marginal from an elitist and somewhat more traditional academic view, those subalterns’ own viewpoints and experiences in relation to the power structure are far from marginal.⁴³

Subaltern as a definition is highly reliant upon the location (both temporal and geographical) and can mean many different things in each location. This thesis therefore, clearly

³⁹ Ranajit Guha, “Introduction,” in *Subaltern Studies Reader*, ed. Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), xvii.

⁴⁰ Guha, “Introduction,” xvii.

⁴¹ Partha Chatterjee, “After Subaltern Studies,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 35 (September 2012): 44.

⁴² Peter Thomas, “Refiguring the Subaltern,” *Political Theory* 46, no. 6 (December 2018): 878. Thomas’ interpretation and work regarding the applicability of the idea of subaltern as it pertains to Gramsci is informative and illuminating. Thomas synthesizes and argues for a “refiguring” of the subaltern from within the analysis of Gramsci.

⁴³ Thomas, 878.

manifests its own definition as one wholly tied to India (with references to various parts of southern Asia) and its period of colonialism, and the silences that are contiguous with such societal framework. Historian Peter Thomas offers a useful synthesis of terminology and definition: “The subaltern can thus be understood as a variant of those figures of marginality and exclusion that have marked the borders of modern political thought...”⁴⁴ The definition provided by Thomas emerged from Ranijit Guha’s influence and bears the mark of Gramsci. To this we may also add further meaning to the term as someone who “rose in revolt at any time or place...necessarily and explicitly in violation of a series of codes which defined [their] very existence as a member of that colonial...society.”⁴⁵ Therefore, when utilized in this thesis, subaltern is in reference to a specific person or group held in marginality by the governing class or colonial oppressor. The voices of these people, who were often forced to be without administrative, economic, or social power were silenced and made to be held in subordination.

Early in the seventeenth century, the British came to India and the East Indies. With them they brought their own assumptions of power and prowess that also need to be put into context as to how they functioned within the Imperial framework and how they interacted with not only their own colonized structures of power but also the imperial colonizers and their own definitions. Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper stress the need of those studying colonial regimes to recognize that those colonial powers can attempt to draw very distinct lines between colonizer and colonized, and that such Manichaeian ideas and frameworks should not be readily fallen into.⁴⁶ Colonizers typically tried to draw distinct lines: “...a grammar of difference was continuously and vigilantly crafted as people in colonies refashioned and contested European

⁴⁴ Thomas, 862.

⁴⁵ Ranajit Guha, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” in *Writings on South Asian History and Society II* ed. Ranajit Guha. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993): 1.

⁴⁶ Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 3.

claims to superiority.”⁴⁷ Distinct lines then represented a struggle, between colonized and colonizer, as to the very apparent and well-known frameworks of power that existed and were both present in the same place at the same time. Two power structures existing temporally and geographically near or on top of one another, represents a dichotomy and lead to anxiety and stress as to the location of the real lines of power. Eventually, through both directed and undirected shifts or mergings, those dynamics of power within the new synthesized cultural framework worked to either overtly include or exclude some component piece. As such, power, especially cultural power, can be fickle.

Culture itself is a nebulous topic, and cultural power or ideas about cultural power and prowess can also be quite ephemeral. It covers necessarily broad topics and boundaries such as “ideas, forms, images, and imaginings.”⁴⁸ Such diverse and non-concrete items deserve much more discussion than what is in this thesis, and the nautch girls make up only a fragment of the cultural complexity of the area. Cultural power or perceived power that certain cultural artifacts and traditions can bring therefore, depends upon having a uniform idea through a culture on what exactly exudes notions of prowess and piety that can formulate a type of power. In every culture there is some pathway to “sovereignty, to sway, and to dominance.”⁴⁹ The British usurpation and eventual condemnation of the nautch girls, in terms of raw and available power (both soft and overt), is representative of the empire attempting to maintain cultural integrity. The British initial usurpation of the nautch girls represented an attempt by the British to reorder their own cultural power framework and integrate “primitive” data into the local conventions of what it meant to show power.⁵⁰ This first supposed reordering of power by the colonizers eventually would

⁴⁷ Cooper and Stoler, 3.

⁴⁸ Edward W. Said. *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 6.

⁴⁹ Said, 14.

⁵⁰ Said, 98.

succumb to the apprehension and anxieties the prowess of the nautch girls created, and necessitated a further reordering; one without them.

In the case of the nautch girls, the colonizing British Empire was running headlong into cultures that could feature women as a font of power, or in some cases as the actual leaders of the society. In certain temporal locations throughout Southeast Asia, women of moral force or piety, and sometimes prowess, were at the forefront of a system of power in certain regions that the British imperial culture would stumble upon and have to reckon with. By “prowess”, here and elsewhere in this thesis, the definition is taken from Sher Khan’s interpretation and elucidations of O.W. Wolters, in that it is someone who is endowed with or possessing an “abnormal amount of personal and innate soul stuff” that enables others to identify them as a leader or as someone to pledge themselves to for some type of gain.⁵¹ In other words, manifest visible superiority of one type or another that is readily understandable as a function of power. In more succinct terms it is the acknowledgment of inherent power. Inherent power can be overt and manifest, such as kings or queens possess, or it can be “soft” and somewhat subversive in that inherent power may be attached to a part of the cultural framework. It is a piece of the puzzle that makes up what is perceived as power in a societal or cultural system. The nautch girls’ piety, as well as their prowess, served to help form a type of power that was wholly unique for subaltern females.

In the British Imperial wanderings throughout southeast Asia, their cultural framework of power came into contact with both kinds of power with one important distinguishing feature: gender. Overt female power was manifested in the form of “politically influential women and female monarchs” that were “not rare in this region.”⁵² The kingdom of Aceh Dar al-Salam was ruled exclusively by consecutive female rulers for nearly 60 years. Many various polity’s had

⁵¹ Sher Banu A.L. Khan, “Men of prowess and women of piety: A case study of Aceh Dar al-Salam in the seventeenth century,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (June 2013): 204.

⁵² Khan, 205.

numerous female rulers throughout this area. Notions of prowess and piety therefore, came into contact with power directly. In this sense, there were “crucial gender differences in styles of leadership amongst [these] rulers and that the notion of the successful and effective ruler based on charisma and prowess needs to be re-examined.”⁵³ In many of these specific instances, notions of power could shift to more closely align to both piety and consensus.⁵⁴ Critically from Khan it is to be understood that, while female rulers may have appeared to have gendered ideas about them (such as being soft and weak), this soft power was as effective as it could be subversive.

An example of soft power can be seen in the Acehese queens in what is now a province of Indonesia. It has long been the fault of historians and patriarchal societies to think of women who gain a semblance of power as weak, ceremonial, or even to see them as sheer pageantry. Within the Acehese queens and their successors, different avenues to power and prowess can be identified that were parallel to some of the soft power and prowess that the nautch girls employed. The Acehese queens are an exceptional foil for soft power. Typical European and male versions of gendered prowess viewed them as “pageant queens”, as there was a “sense of importance of these spectacles and of theatre in state power” however, “the queens who presided over rituals and ceremonies were not frail...”⁵⁵ That is, there was soft power, as those things that the queens excelled in—spectacles of culture—were seen as contiguous and as a function of power. While their male predecessors utilized overt or hard power in the form of both cruelty and coercion, these female rulers utilized cultural shock and awe as well as convention as their source of power. These men traveled in power due to their force, however the women appeared

⁵³ Khan, 205.

⁵⁴ Khan, 205.

⁵⁵ Khan, 207.

garbed in the robes of cultural power, piety, and grandeur that then lent power to the female. This was largely contiguous to how various nautch girls came to be viewed as culturally powerful.

The discussion on power, prowess, and piety, is an attempt to understand the cultural meaning and how the nautch girls were seen as powerful. In some cases, their power could be said to flow from the piety that was associated with them, such as the *devadasi*. However, when taken as a whole, the prowess, power and influence of the nautch can be broadly interpreted as a cultural artifact. Meaning that the nautch, having been seen simultaneously as courtesans, cultural trainers of the nobility, and as symbols of power, have for too long been moving in close proximity to those trying to exert power and prowess.⁵⁶ As such, this contiguous aspect provided the various nautch girl types (to varying degrees) recognizable forms of both soft and overt power. A power that was ensconced in the wrappings of convention and the nautch having been moving closely with the Mughals (and other empires) and their power systems. Out of this pairing was created a potent gendered subaltern in the nautch girl that was as unique as it was powerful. Drawing upon their past image that was closely connected to overt Mughal power, and being seen as a cultural artifact of power, the nautch were able to exercise a rare form of agency and authority that was all but absent within the British Empire.

Research Questions

Many questions arise and come into play when the Empire is studied through the lens of the nautch girls. What is lacking in current dialogues is a focused discussion of their power and exactly what this means in terms of imperial projection, cultural framework, and subalternity. In other words the nautch girls, due to their agency and visible cultural power and prowess, stood out within the imperial framework to such an extent so as to spawn a movement against them.

⁵⁶ Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance," 263.

This was unique in that a subaltern had such influence and cultural presence that an entire movement was needed to remove their source of stress in the empire. In specific relation to their imperial colonizers, how did they come to have so many aspects of power that are simply not available to many of the other subaltern groups within the Empire? How then are they so formidable that the imperial colonizers usurped and appropriated them for their own gain, and what does this tell us about the competing cultural structures? What specifically did the nautch girls engender that was so dangerous to the imperial id?

The nautch girls offer themselves to history as a unique foil for imperial power. Charn Jagpal's work shows the nautch girls as a particularly effective counter for the British imperial feminist movement and women's rights within the empire. This is certainly part of the answer to the above questions, but is only a small piece. The nautch puzzle is necessarily large and multifaceted as it reflects the quality and inherent power of the nautch girls. How can a subaltern truly be classified as a subaltern whilst possessing so many qualities that propel them far above what usually enters into the mind's eye when the word "subaltern" is raised? It is this paradox that the nautch girls' cultural power (in relation to other subalterns and the imperial colonizers) represents that can lead to a further understanding and an attempt to answer the above questions: it is their power that is simultaneously both overt and soft, highly visible and gendered, subaltern in nature but supreme in practice, that eventually rendered themselves incompatible with the imperial cultural framework and a target for extirpation.

Mapping the Thesis

Each chapter of this thesis focuses on designated specific aspects of nautch girl history in the British Empire, as well as offer critical analysis of the interpretation or impact of that power. Following this introductory chapter, chapter 1 discusses the power of the nautch, both in how it

was obtained in a historical and cultural sense, as well as its utilization and interpretation by both native and colonizer forces. Chapter 2 shows multiple specific instances of the prowess of the nautch girls upending colonizer ideals such as benevolence or superiority, and even directly challenging or supplanting the Empire and its notions of supremacy. Chapter 2 focuses on the power of the nautch girls as they expose the paradoxes of imperial colonial power structures. The conclusion offers brief examples of colonizer mimicry and imitation of the nautch girls as the ultimate example of counterflow. Ending arguments discuss why the nautch girls were not a typical subaltern, and created unique challenges for the Empire. These challenges were a function of the visible superiority, power, and agency of the nautch girls triumphing over colonizer ideals and epistemological frameworks.

Chapter 1

This chapter discusses various sources of the nautch girls' power and provides multiple case studies to showcase their prowess and interpretation. It starts with a brief overview of the origins and cultural significance of the nautch girls' power, as well as how those qualities have evolved. Case studies used show how the nautch girls were utilized by both indigenous and colonizer forces, with specific emphasis as to how their power structure was interpreted by the British Empire. Understanding the differing power structures and their interactions is a starting point towards understanding the basics of the nautch girls' power: how it was created, utilized, and interpreted. It ends with a nuanced discussion of cultural power as a lens to better understand colonizer epistemological frameworks.

Nautch Power, Prowess, Piety

Understanding how the nautch girls came to be seen as symbols of power, authority, and cultural piety requires at least a passing understanding of their culture and history. Dancing is held higher on the subcontinent than it is in typical western societies, particularly in a religious sense:

“Dance and music, according to Indian tradition, are divine creation.”⁵⁷ Shiva and his dance empower the performing body of the man, of creation and destruction show the mythological importance that dancing holds. Dancing by a man or male bodies is respectable, but when similar dances are done by women, it can be seen as either respectful or disrespectful depending on the viewpoint or gender politics of the observer. The appellation of “nautch girls” lends credence to the nautch dance they performed, the very thing they are named after can be considered a mimicry of divine creation or even the divine itself. In the melting pot of belief systems that is

⁵⁷ Nevile, 1.

India, Buddhist literature is contiguous with Hindu religious sanctification and the high art of dancing: “Buddhist literature also testifies to the high esteem in which she (dancing girl or ‘public woman’) was held in society.”⁵⁸ Some of the nautch girls even claimed descent from the *Apsaras*, or celestial maiden, that is prevalent in both Hinduism and Buddhism.⁵⁹ With the mixture of the Islamic belief system into the complex societal ecosystem of India, the institution of the “dancing girl” was further enhanced as dancing “was an essential component of royal entertainment.”⁶⁰ Dancing then, was a critical aspect of mythological creation, religious sanctity, and ostentatious nobility. It was an important part of the foundational substance of the subcontinent.

Within this mixture of cultural and religious piety, historical importance, and intrinsic power existed many different types of dancer throughout the historical breadth of India: as a symbol of good luck in the Puranas, to the divine in the *aspara*, to the *devadasi*, *kanchani*, *tawa'if*, *nartaki*, *ganika*, and so on.⁶¹ Sanctity of dance and the primacy of dance in mythology was further typified by Hindu temples by having nautch girls perform sacred dance and music during temple rites.⁶² In this thesis, the nautch girl as a term, is the common appellation and inheritor of the cultural significance, piety, and importance of these groups. It is a catch-all definition that encompasses the many different types of dancing girl or public woman whilst simultaneously existing alongside specific groups of dancers. The long standing cultural and historical importance was then enhanced with the coming of the Mughal's (and other empires) and the proximity to power that was given to the various forms of the nautch girl.⁶³

⁵⁸ Neville, 1.

⁵⁹ Lily Strickland, “The Mythological Background of Hindu Music,” *The Musical Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (July 1931): 332.

⁶⁰ Neville, 3.

⁶¹ Neville, 1.

⁶² Strickland, 337.

⁶³ Oldenburg, “Lifestyle as Resistance,” 263.

Whilst Nevile Pran elucidates that, “dancing was an essential component of royal entertainment” for the Mughals, court life and its importance was understated by him.⁶⁴ The Mughal court was itself of integral importance to the functioning of the empire, and represents a cultural and administrative, highly visible center:

“The Mughal court represented the centre of imperial power. At the court, the emperor performed his governmental duties; he received his nobles and foreign embassies, directed the departments of state, dispensed justice and inspected the army.”⁶⁵

The imperial court therefore, can be interpreted to have formed a cultural nexus of ostentatious wealth, power, and visible hierarchy. It was a cyclical reinforcement of ranking and cultural strata, and it was within this court that those who would later be acclaimed as nautch girls were moving in close proximity to the power structure and primary movers of the empire. The highly visible spectacles of the nautch performances within the court would lead to the nautch girls being associated with the power of the court. This was further reinforced as the reverse is readily apparent: “The utmost form of chastisement inflicted on the topmost officers was to forbid their attendance at the royal court: they were not permitted to attend *darbar* and offer salutations to the emperor.”⁶⁶ The court of the empire, and being highly visible within that court, yielded power and notability to the participants. Whilst these quotes relate specifically to the Mughal court of Akbar, the premise is applicable to Mughal Imperial court life (and other imperial courts) in general and its definitions of power specifically. Ceremony and pomp of the court and its highly visible routines were thus associated with the trappings of power. Court rituals such as these worked to graft divine authority to that of imperial authority.⁶⁷ While these quotes are about Emperor Akbar, they nonetheless represent critical court influence of the culturally significant

⁶⁴ Nevile, 4.

⁶⁵ Balkrishan Shivram, “Mughal Court Rituals: The Symbolism of Imperial Authority During Akbar's Reign,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 67 (2006-2007): 338.

⁶⁶ Shivram, 338.

⁶⁷ Shivram, 345.

Mughals, in which the nautch traveled, gained favor, and were eventually seen as functions of visible power.

Powerful court influence was present in Southern India as well: in an attempt to co-opt historical importance from the fallen Vijayanagar dynasty, Rajawodeyar I moved his capital whilst he revived importance of dance in the royal court and “simultaneously the temple dancers also received a good number of opportunities to exhibit their art of music and dance.”⁶⁸ Revitalization of the dance was a critical avenue for garnering yet more perceived or “adjacent” power, especially that of soft power, for the nautch girls. Not only had the nautch girls been an aspect of religious power, but now with the added sense of closeness to power that the elite courts provided them, they had become associated as being visible representations of prowess. In habitually having traveled in close proximity to such highly visible power, and they themselves being a highly visible component of that power, the nautch girls would eventually usurp and co-opt some of the power from these elite courts in the form of accrued wealth, respect in social standing, and importantly through the education and advisement of young nobles as well as their own education.⁶⁹

As a function of their being courtesans and actors within the courts of power in India, the nautch girls underwent significant education and training.⁷⁰ Education was not merely an aspect of being a part of court culture, although court culture surely added to the knowledge base of the nautch girl, education itself was a primary constituent of what it meant to be a nautch girl.

Contemporary British author Priscilla Chapman, writing in the first half of the nineteenth century

⁶⁸ B.V. Sudhamani, “The Institution of Devadasis - A Study in the Princely State of Mysore (1610-1910),” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 60 (1999): 667.

⁶⁹ Adolf Waley, *A Pageant of India* (London: Constable and Co., 1927), 266. Waley notes of a Hindu nautch girl, Rupmati, who was not only a “talented poetess and composer”, but was the “dominant influence” of Baz Bahadur, the Malwa sultan.

⁷⁰ Mekhala Sengupta, “Courtesan Culture in India: The Transitions from the Devdasi to the Tawaif or Bojje,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 129.

and possessing vitriolic and religiously based opinions on Indian women and culture, posited that no other female in India but the nautch can read.⁷¹ In the process of her 175 page harangue, Chapman begrudgingly admitted to the education level of the nautch girl, and that from “former days” that the historical underpinnings of this education of the nautch was “well authenticated.”⁷² Here she had given historical precedent to the long-standing education of the nautch girls. Chapman even admitted that they were worthy of praise, in that the nautch girl could not only read and write, but also for their function as “composers and translators of books, for which their memory is deservedly held in high esteem.”⁷³ The nautch girls were therefore not only educated in terms of court life and proceedings, but in literature as well: a combination that resulted in an increase of influence and soft power, perceived value, political and social standing, and further reinforcement of the idea of the nautch as a powerful cultural artifact.

The educational prowess of the nautch girls was made concrete when they were given the authority to be educators of the nobility: “It was not uncommon for the young sons of the nobility to be sent to the best-known salons for instruction in etiquette, the art of conversation and polite manners, and the appreciation of Urdu literature.”⁷⁴ While this above quote was in reference to a group of *tawaif*, it can easily be applied and writ large as many sub-groups of nautch girls traveled in high courts. Many nautch girls were temple educated, educated in the courts, or were educated by those who had already had their education in the form of their mothers and elder females. Oldenburg here provides further critical analysis via her interpretation of Abdulhalim Sharar. Sharar was a scholar and writer born in 1860 and provided critical insight as to the prowess of the courtesan as a type of cultural relic, “Sharar was strongly

⁷¹ Priscilla Chapman, *Hindoo Female Education* (London: Seeley and Burside, 1839), 27.

⁷² Chapman, 27.

⁷³ Chapman, 27.

⁷⁴ Oldenburg, “Lifestyle as Resistance,” 263.

of the opinion that the morals, manners, and distinctiveness of Lucknow culture and society were sustained by the courtesans.”⁷⁵ Here then in Lucknow, an extremely valuable and important city to the British in India, the courtesan culture and the nautch girl can be interpreted as a moral center and type of cultural guidepost. The education of the *tawaif* in Lucknow, as well as their being a cultural relic endowed with moral and manners that are viewed as “right” in the society, were not endemic to Lucknow; as will be shown throughout this thesis, the nautch girls from various parts of the subcontinent would have these qualities. The education and moral certitude that was found in the nautch were both vestiges and amplifiers of the soft power that their being a cultural artifact affords them.

The nautch girls’ power was not something only experienced by others, but was an aspect of their cultural artifact that they were fully aware of. From Charn Jagpal “...the muslim courtesans of Lucknow (formally known as *tawaifs*) view themselves as ‘powerful, independent, even subversive women.’”⁷⁶ This subaltern group went well beyond their intended juxtaposition within the British Empire, and saw themselves as “a matricentric community who establish a counterculture to patriarchy -a ‘lifestyle as a resistance’- characterized by financial, political, and physical independence.”⁷⁷ Indeed, the nautch girls stood as a high-water mark for feminine power and rights that would eventually be recognized as dangerous to the cultural superiority that was the underpinning of the British Empire.

Adding to the growing soft power base the nautch girls possessed, and to magnify their impact as a potent cultural artifact, there were numerous accounts of the nautch attaining hard power. Gaining hard power was told largely through legends and myths (typically these involve

⁷⁵ Oldenburg, “Lifestyle as Resistance,” 263.

⁷⁶ Charn Jagpal, “‘Going Nautch Girl’ in the ‘Fin de Siecle’: The White Woman Burdened by Colonial Domesticity,” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 52, no. 3 (2009): 253.

⁷⁷ Jagpal, “Going Nautch Girl,” 253.

courtesans however the intuitive leap to nautch girls in the place of these courtesans is a small one), whereby a ruler or powerful male became infatuated and either made the courtesan or the nautch girl his queen, or outright gave them power. This was a paradox to the gendered white male cultural supremacy that was an important piece of the imperial framework. It is a common trope throughout history that women have always had the power to occasionally turn the tables and make men uxorious, and it was no different even within the strict cultural hierarchy of the British Empire. In the *Tarash*, the first known Indian novel, “the dusky Alfina ” captivated many (including white captains), and by her own agency the siren stripped the fortunes of the princes.⁷⁸ Not only were British and Indian men susceptible to being humbled by the opposite gender, a French physician named Bernard provided another testimony against the supposed cultural supremacy of the white male over the brown body. Bernard spent lavish sums of money on the dancing girls, and in lieu of a large monetary gift from a prince, he instead asked for the hand in marriage of one of the girls.⁷⁹ The enthrallment of male bodies by the nautch girls lasted even into the 20th century: in Bombay in 1925, fifteen men were arrested and one shot with a nautch girl “sensation” at the center of attention.⁸⁰ Long is the historical list of men who were turned subservient to women, even ones who were supposedly subaltern or “inferior”.

Pursuing Respect, Loyalty, and Perceived Cultural Awareness

The influential status that the nautch girls attained was a perception they actively worked to enhance. Certainly the nautch were paid well for their services, being amongst the richest in society, but payment in terms of future respectability or in certain items that enhanced the

⁷⁸ John Lall, “Of nautch girls and princelings,” review of *Nautch Girls of India*, by Pran Nevile, *India International Centre Quarterly* 25, no. 2/3 (Summer 1998): 171.

⁷⁹ Nevile, 18.

⁸⁰ “A Sinister Plot: Nautch Girl Sensation,” *Advertiser* (Adelaide, SA), Apr. 2, 1925.

prestige of the nautch girls and their particular place in society was desirable and crucial.⁸¹

Katherine Butler Schofield, in her podcast *Histories of the Ephemeral - A Bloody Difficult Woman: Mayalee Dancing Girl vs. the East India Company*, both discovers and relates the tale of Mayalee, a “dancing girl” in Jaipur, and her quest to uphold or expand her moral righteousness and respectability in the form of her monthly stipend.⁸² The EIC had seized control of a lake that produced salt, and was attempting to shift historical payments and stipends for certain individuals away from salt to cash. Four nautch girls had been receiving payments in salt from the lake.⁸³ Lieutenant Morrison (the man in control of the salt at the time) attempted to force them to stop taking payments in salt, and Mayalee successfully retained her salt payments after six months.⁸⁴ Why would a nautch girl perceive salt to be more valuable than sufficient monetary compensation? Why would a nautch girl or courtesan pursue and fight for her hereditary payments to continue to be in the form of salt?

The idea of *namak halali* or “faithfulness to the salt”, is one of respect and cultural heritage as well as courtly power. The idea stems from both Mughal and Rajput court-life and understandings of respect and loyalty.⁸⁵ Salt (having salt, being paid in salt) was a signifier of at least some type of power through respect. The loyalty to the salt could be transferred and applied to those whose salt is eaten, meaning that in the giving of salt for someone to eat, the person doing the giving can expect a greater level of loyalty from those eating their salt.⁸⁶ From a

⁸¹ Oldenburg, “Lifestyle as Resistance,” 259.

⁸² Katherine Schofield, “A Bloody Difficult Woman: Mayalee Dancing Girl vs. the East India Company,” November 25, 2018, in *Histories of the Ephemeral*, podcast, 43:10, <https://soundcloud.com/user-513302522/a-bloody-difficult-woman-mayalee-dancing-girl-vs-the-east-india-company>

⁸³ Schofield, 3:18.

⁸⁴ Schofield, 5:30.

⁸⁵ Kaushik Roy, “From the Mamluks to the Mansabdars: A Social History of Military Service in South Asia, c. 1500 to c. 1650,” in *Fighting for a Living*, ed. Erik-Jan Zürcher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 109.

⁸⁶ Roy, 109.

different perspective, this loyalty could also be viewed as respect. In the enhancing of the loyalty of people that a nautch girl like Mayalee would have been engaging with, she was, as a byproduct, also enhancing their respect for her. Those receiving her salt become more beholden, more in awe, and held more in her sway for any number of useful future applications. While this was especially applicable to those lower on the cultural ladder than herself, the respectability of salt would also have been a significant boost to her appearance in terms of possible employers. “Mayalee herself, was ritually auspicious. A powerful hereditary courtesan dedicated to the service of Hindu ceremonies.”⁸⁷ Therefore enhancing her visibility and prestige by any means, such as increasing loyalty or respect amongst potential employers and those who would witness her perform her cultural role, was simply a wise long term investment. In Mayalee’s case as a nautch girl, respect and enhancing the public view of oneself in terms of loyalty, was far more valuable than mere money. *Namak halali* was something important for a nautch girl who had the status to demand salt from the white colonizers. The perceived increase in loyalty and respect went hand in hand with a bettering of one's social status and renown. The fact that Mayalee was aware of salt as a status enhancer, and actively worked to receive it, showed that Mayalee had deep awareness of her own font of cultural power, prowess, and piety. Salt for her went far beyond a mere commodity: it was a commodity of respect.

Lieutenant Morrison, in his effort to take this away from Mayalee, was very likely unaware that a female courtesan would have such a status, and that salt for her served as a power-enhancing substance. While this has to be inferred, in general the intimacies of the colonized cultural framework and its own historic interactions, especially in the case with commodities such as salt, the true meaning of salt was likely not understood by the lieutenant. In

⁸⁷ Schofield, 6:45.

general, “the British ignored the complex affinities that cut across religious and cultural lines.”⁸⁸

The most likely scenario therefore, was that Morrison was attempting to maximize his profit (the primary goal) at the expense of the colonized with little or no inkling of the cultural signals that lay behind the substance of salt. He inadvertently strayed into impacting the colonized power structure, and Mayalee’s recovery of her salt stipend showed that for her as well as other nautch girls, enhancing one’s respectability and perceived prestige had a multiplicative effect on future business. Oldenburg mentions this obliquely in passing, that the courtesans and nautch girls of Lucknow, a primary cultural nexus, were seen as being more respectful or having more gravitas and could easily attain gainful employment elsewhere ahead of other competitors due to their innate and culturally recognized superior status.⁸⁹ The nautch girls of Lucknow enjoyed higher respect and therefore higher monetary compensation and employment opportunities by virtue of the intense cultural nexus that Lucknow imparted upon them. Mayalee had worked to enhance her own respect and future employment prospects by fighting for the salt. No matter the location, perceived respect was an important factor in the success of a nautch girl.

In defying her colonizers in attaining her historic stipend of salt, Mayalee had worked to better her standing within her own colonized cultural system, and enhance it with the loyalty and respectability that came with *namak halali*. Commanding more respect and being held in higher respect amongst those future employers was critical to the foundations of perceived power in the colonized epistemological formations. If the nobles were sending their young princes and elites to receive education from the nautch girls, they would be more likely to choose (and pay more) for the nautch girl with the highest degree of repute and respect. As such for Mayalee, salt works on every single level as a force multiplier for her own cultural authority. As a harbinger of soft

⁸⁸ Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856-1877* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 81.

⁸⁹ Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856-1877*, 142.

power, the nautch girls and their own self perception was less relevant with respect to how important it was to be perceived as having that power or cultural weight by others. In Mayalee's case, she enhanced her prowess, piety, and cultural power by choosing the cultural magnifier of salt over monetary payment. Her agency was shown to be prodigious in winning against the EIC, and her use of *namak halali* and her willingness to fight for the salt, lends credence to the perceived importance of respect for the nautch girls.

The perception of the nautch girls by both colonizers and the colonized, is of critical importance in the attempt to discern the magnitude of their cultural relevancy and the nature of their importance and power. The British, in their attempt to weaken and subvert this powerful cultural relic of the nautch girls, would eventually come to label them as prostitutes and degrade them to antiquated entertainment. However until that time when the anti-nautch movement is in full force (and even still during it), the sources that mention the nautch alongside entertainment and spectacle are, without fail, always careful to point out that the nautch are going to be present at a function. While these sources mention them in the same breath as entertainment or something similar to a spectacle, it was important to the authors of the primary sources to denote that in addition to whatever is being proffered by the local elite, that the nautch girls would be present as well.⁹⁰ Even well into the period of anti-nautch leanings, the nautch are still considered by the colonized to be an intrinsic part of the cultural identity and an important piece of the id of the various cultures in which the nautch moved. In 1892, in an attempt to deduce what should be shown at the coming World Fair as the representation of their culture, the list included elephants, sati, tea, and nautch.⁹¹

⁹⁰ "Bengal Hurkaru," *Madras Courier*, Nov. 8, 1809.

⁹¹ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Notes and Queries," *The Journal of Education* 36, no. 16 (Oct. 1892): 270.

The nautch girls, even into the anti-nautch period, stood as a recognizable cultural marker and important functionary of not only religious life in colonized India, but everyday life. The fact that the nautch were chosen to be a signifier of the cultural definition of India in the World Fair (along such obvious identifiers such as elephants and tea), was directly representational to their importance to the cultural framework of the colonized. That they were still posited as a potential for the World Fair amidst the anti-nautch movement is indicative of their relevance to the general id of the subcontinent. Taken as a whole, the various groups and religious factions that were claimed as nautch girls stood as an enduring and resonant cultural relic that had not only historic significance, but an air of wealth, prowess, education, and respect that was made even more an outlier given their gender. As well shall see, in the aftermath of Plassey, the nautch girls stood out to the British as a gendered enigma, a subaltern with significant latent cultural power and historic respectability and education. Taken as a whole, and with very few exceptions, they were something novel to the British who would struggle greatly to understand and place the nautch girls within their own colonizer epistemological formations. The Empire's inability to properly define and locate the nautch within their framework would eventually help the colonizer to view the nautch as an outlier and a target for eradication.

Expanding Nautch Power and Utilization

Indigenous use of nautch prowess by a noble was often to supplement or magnify their own standing, or even to help promote acceptance of an action. In 1852, a Peishwa of the Maratha people died and left his property and power to an adopted son that went by the moniker Nana Sahib.⁹² Upon accepting this inheritance, the British announced that the pension and

⁹² Benjamin Robbins Curtis, "A Journey around the World," *Journal of the American Geographical Society of New York*, 1880, 12 (1880): 149.

high-standing that went with his new station would not be continued. With the coming of the heightened tensions between colonizer and colonized, and the eventual revolt, Nana saw his chance to right “unnoticed injuries”.⁹³ During the revolt Nana had captured prisoners, and then had them executed in what was termed by the British as a, “fiendish massacre”.⁹⁴ The primary source for this story, Benjamin Robbins Curtis, Esq., stated that after the massacre that Nana “ordered a nautch”.⁹⁵ The source was careful to point out that although feasting and revelry went on through the night, the nautch was ordered first. It is somewhat striking that the first action Nana takes after killing these prisoners, was to purposefully order a nautch. He did not fortify the encampment, train his soldiers, nor plan for future movements in light of the knowledge the British were already out and seeking to stamp out the rebellion in force: the nautch came first. Certainly Nana is utilizing the nautch girls for one of their intended functions. He was using them to throw their cultural weight behind him, to add to his gravitas and cultural standing that of the powerful nautch girls as well as showing off his wealth. However, the immediacy of his ordering of the nautch inferred an additional layer to the nautch girls and their utilization, one that is only defined by an exterior (colonizer) contemporary source correctly exactly once.⁹⁶

Nana Sahib was certainly aware of the reasoning behind his own utilization of the nautch girls, but a correct colonizer perspective of this particular use is rare. Captain Charles Rolleston and his writings during his travels in southern India are an exceptionally culturally fluent and educated account, and was the only colonizer source to correctly identify the power of the nautch

⁹³ Curtis, 149.

⁹⁴ Curtis, 151.

⁹⁵ Curtis, 151.

⁹⁶ Through the many sources analyzed for this thesis, only one non-native contemporary source correctly surmises a yet undefined aspect of the nautch: that of the ability to confer correctness. This does not mean that other sources cannot have this information, certainly there is a chance that someone contemporary correctly analyzed the nautch to their full cultural potential, however in my own findings only one non-native contemporary source hits on this power of the nautch with the correct lens: Captain Rolleston.

girls. In his travels to the deserted city of Vijayanagar, he related that they used wicker boats covered in ox skin that matched the description that Herodotus gave 2,000 years prior.⁹⁷ During his trip, he was awed by the massive granite structures and construction that was, “proof that the native architects possessed a large amount of mechanical skill,” adding that he and those traveling with him could not glean how they were raised.⁹⁸ While this was a cultural acknowledgement, it was far more typical for colonizers to attribute accomplishments that are beyond the colonizers’ skill to anyone and anything but the colonized (including sorcery, magic, or even previous white civilizations). By attributing this squarely to the native architects, Rolleston again showed remarkable cultural understanding and that his opinion was at the very least, more free of the typical prejudiced view of colonizer superiority.⁹⁹ The city then became inhabited for *Yatra*, that Rolleston likened to *Saturnalia*, in which he had multiple interactions with and observations of the nautch girls. Rolleston made large intuitive leaps, but showed his own thinking and cultural awareness (and depth of traveling experience and exposure to cultures) as he related that the rings and bells which make noise when the nautch dance were very similar to the Spanish Fandango, “which was introduced into Spain by the Arabs, who are said to have taken the idea from the dance of India.”¹⁰⁰ His cultural analogies and assertions spanned two continents, a wide berth of time, and multiple cultural and ethnic groups, and can be taken as evidence of his awareness, knowledge and ability to make broad cultural connections.

⁹⁷ Charles Rolleston and Edward W. Badger. “The Deserted City of Vijayanagar,” *Journal of the Society of Arts* 44, no. 2267 (May 1896): 535.

⁹⁸ Rolleston and Badger, 534.

⁹⁹ This is a common trope throughout the world: a typically western traveler being stunned by what an indigenous culture could create and misattributing it to anything but the natives of the area in an attempt to secure western ideas of supremacy. Even in North America, John Filson in *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke, 1784* attributes Indian mounds as having been built by the Welsh (pg. 73). What is important is the distinction that it had to have been a ‘white’ culture that did it, and not the native culture.

¹⁰⁰ Rolleston and Badger, 537.

His own analysis and views regarding the nautch were no less stunning in their breadth and grasp, stating that the nautch girls were different enough from what was going on (during *Yatra*) that he considered them to belong to their own caste.¹⁰¹ This was again unique in the many sources analyzed, in that they appeared to him to stand apart from the typical subaltern group, whether compared to the pilgrims coming to celebrate *Yatra* or from other performers for the festivities. He again tried to tie what he was seeing to other historic cultures, in comparing the dancers for this festival having worn, “white muslin robes, much the same as the ancient Greek dress.”¹⁰² By continually drawing throughlines and connections between what he was seeing and what he understood in terms of western cultural and historic knowledge formations, Rolleston was attempting to position the nautch correctly without being fully aware of their own power structure and epistemological framework.

Rolleston, having shown his understanding and cultural sensitivity as well as the depth of his knowledge and ability to apply it in a worthwhile manner, then made a stunning observation, one that shifts the viewpoint of the nautch girls and places them higher in the power formation than previously assessed: “...those girls who dance well sometimes make considerable fortunes, as their services are continually required; religious festivals, entertainments, and marriage ceremonies not being considered *en règle* without being accompanied by a nautch.”¹⁰³ The nautch girls therefore, according to a specific colonizer lens, had the distinct ability to add correctness to an event or have that particular event be considered in accordance with the rules. The ability to denote correctness added a new layer to the prodigious soft power that the nautch already lay claim to (as discussed earlier in the form of hereditary cultural resonances, wealth, education, prestige, etc.): a layer capable of approaching what could be considered hard power.

¹⁰¹ Rolleston and Badger, 535.

¹⁰² Rolleston and Badger, 535.

¹⁰³ Rolleston and Badger, 535.

The ability of the nautch girls, by their mere presence, granting a form of cultural “rightness”, was a power multiplier. When applied to other instances of interactions with the nautch, this ability created a subaltern so powerful as to be essentially unrecognizable to the colonizer and unable to be correctly positioned within the colonial framework.

Applying Rolleston’s observations to Nana Sahib, the local noble who massacred the British during the revolt then immediately threw a nautch, Nana had utilized the nautch girls as a legitimizing force. Their presence certainly had all the aspects of their cultural artifact; Nana was engaging in their services to show how wealthy and powerful he was, that he was magnificent enough to be even able to have the nautch girls appear and enhance his prestige and cultural standing. However, utilizing Rolleston’s observation Nana was also and perhaps most importantly using the nautch as a rubber stamp of approval for his actions which may have been morally dubious. In the account of Nana Sahib, and in many accounts that involved the nautch girls, they were mentioned in the same sentence as feasting or revelry.¹⁰⁴ In Curtis’ account of the nautch he failed to grasp the exact cultural magnitude of the nautch’s presence. Curtis had reason to explicitly confirm the presence of the nautch girls at the behest of Nana Sahib, but as a colonizer failed to recognize their proper place within the colonized power knowledge formation. Cultural lack of awareness created a significant gap between the perceived power knowledge structures and the actual. Such a forceful dichotomy lended itself to cultural friction and tension (enhanced by the subalternity and gender differences), and importantly opened up the avenue for cultural counterflow, when the colonizers largely failed to realize the prodigious abilities of the nautch girls.

Colonial Readings of the Nautch

¹⁰⁴ Curtis, 151.

In solidifying their rule of the Indian subcontinent, the British needed to continually reinforce the idea of visible supremacy over their subjects.¹⁰⁵ Supremacy was critical to maintaining the idea of a benevolent empire. The nautch girls represented a potent force that both directly and indirectly challenged these British foundational ideals and power structures. The nautch girls countering colonizer superiority was directly visible in multiple British sources where, by virtue of their cultural significance and prowess, they overawe their British spectators and created visible anxiety. These British onlookers did not recognize the true cultural potency of the nautch girls and misinterpreted what they were seeing. The colonized nobles and powerful characters who had been utilizing the nautch as both a function of cultural power and a force multiplier for their own majesty, were enthusiastic about the transaction taking place within their court. The British spectators became overawed by the nautch girls (precisely one of their goals) and in their flummoxed state submitted (in various ways) to their colonized culture.

The prowess of the nautch girls was largely misinterpreted by the British, especially in their early forays into the subcontinent. Sir Frank Swettenham, a contemporary British administrator, described his partaking of a nautch girl troupe performing for Bandahara Ahmed (a local noble). In this firsthand account, Swettenham was overawed and spent six paragraphs just describing the dress of the Nautch girls as well as their beauty: “All these performers, we were told with much solemnity, were artists of the first order, masters in their craft, and I think they proved the justice of the praise.”¹⁰⁶ The cultural dominance that was required of the British Empire was not being upheld, and the nautch girls demonstrated a paradox when the culture of the subaltern was held high. Sir Swettenham was overawed by the nautch girl in a reversion of how the cultural transaction was supposed to have taken place. Swettenham showed another

¹⁰⁵ Price, 607

¹⁰⁶ Frank A. Swettenham, “A Malay Nautch,” *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, no. 2 (December 1878): 165.

paradox of the cultural framework, in the closeness of the white body to the brown body: in order to appear benevolent and impose cultural superiority, the British white colonizer should have never been in the thrall of the colonized.

Swettenham missed the exact implications of the nautch girls entirely. In this function, they were being utilized by Bandahara Ahmed as a magnification of his own power. The nautch girls were there to bolster the nawab, as both a visible manifestation of the wealth of the local elite (in that he was able to even pay for their expensive presence), but more importantly (from Rolleston) the nautch girls were lending the nawab their cultural weight in saying that he was right or correct to entertain these British foreigners. The nawab was in effect paying to partially usurp and utilize the nautch girls' authority to give credence to his own actions. Where Swettenham saw only beautiful dancers holding him as their thrall for the evening as an expression of their culture, the local nawab was seeing his foreign (and perhaps dangerous) guests being overawed and rendered slack jawed at the cultural transaction taking place. At the end of the evening, Swettenham asked if he might be able to leave a present for the performers.¹⁰⁷ In doing so, he was showing deference to the local culture and noble, and acknowledging his own shortcomings of understanding what had transpired. Further, the act of giving a gift can be interpreted as more than just a token of appreciation for a memorable night: it can be inferred as tribute. Ahmed "consented" to the gift given "seemingly with pleasure".¹⁰⁸ Ahmed was of course exuding pleasure, because the primary function of the nautch girls, from his own lens, was to act as a simulacrum of his own power and wealth. The colonizer and their preconceived patriarchal and beneficent notions of supremacy and their knowledge formations had been subverted by the nautch girls.

¹⁰⁷ Swettenham, 167.

¹⁰⁸ Swettenham, 167.

Lt.-Colonel of Engineers in Bengal, C.J.C. Davidson Esq. (who will be analyzed at length later) offered a very well traveled and important instance of the nautch subverting colonizer notions of power. Davidson was a culturally aware traveler and well-versed in the minoritized knowledge formations on the subcontinent, yet still he fell short of grasping the enormity of what he witnessed. Even though he admitted to being present at “scores of nautches”, the subtle, gendered, and subaltern prowess that was being witnessed during his present account of the nautch girls worked to overawe him and delude him from making the cultural connection and grasping what it was the local Raj was trying to do to him.¹⁰⁹ After his presence at the Raj’s request and bearing witness to an evening of festivities including a nautch and an elephant ride, Davidson joyously toasted the Raj in his travel journal, and praised him as a “patriot-king”.¹¹⁰ Davidson, for all his cultural awareness and attunement, missed that he had just had his perceptions of colonial power structures and their inherent direction shifted. Much like Swettenham, he left with a changed ordering of his own cultural knowledge formations and his estimations of the colonized culture had been assuredly raised, having had his original preconceived notions (however well versed in the culture he was) affected by the nautch girls.

Swettenham and Davidson’s accounts showed how local elites, Rajas, or nawabs, effectively utilized the cultural magnitude of the nautch girls to successfully overawe people external to the cultural framework. As a ruler, being able to slackjaw and undermine possible future opponents was critical, and the blatant show of power that the nautch girls engender in this application speaks to the potency of their work. However, the prowess of the nautch girls also had the ability to be exported outside the native cultural framework and still work in favor of their employers. In 1899 Captain A.W. Stiffe of the Royal Indian Marines wrote extensively

¹⁰⁹ C.J.C. Davidson, Esq. *Diary of Travels and Adventures in Upper India* (London: Henry Colburn, 1843), 161-162.

¹¹⁰ Davidson, 164.

about the trade networks involved throughout the Persian Gulf.¹¹¹ In his history of the location he invoked Gemelli Carreri, who traveled there between 1693 and 1699. Traveling between the cities of Kung and Bahrain, Carreri notes the multi-cultural aspect of these trading centers, and lists off various peoples that he sees including Moors, Indians, Arabs, Jews, Armenians, English, Dutch, and Portuguese.¹¹² Within this cultural amalgamation, the Banianes (Hindu merchants) had a nautch girl perform. This was a somewhat curious use of the expensive nautch girls, as it didn't fit with the idea of local nobles utilizing them to overawe and provide a type of mental and cultural subjugation or deference for colonial outsiders. Here, according to Carreri, the nautch girls were being brought outside the confines of India to perform during the *Diváli*, and their prowess and piety were on full display. Carreri, according to Stiffe, "describes the nautch at length", and that they "pleased him so much that he wanted to see them again and again."¹¹³

With no noble or Raja present to directly gain from the association with the nautch girls, it must be inferred that the merchants were gaining specific value from their expensive presence of some type. In the most banal of all potential purposes for their presence, it is possible that they were there as beautiful women to help sell the merchant's goods. However this is trite and superficial, as powerful nautch girls of the type that were able to impress Carreri, would be simply too expensive to be considered and brought due to mere profit and loss concerns. Their use in this context therefore, was likely aligned to Rolleston's argument. In this function, the nautch girls that were present and performed in front of Carreri, were there as a legitimizing force, to lend rightness and correctness to the mission of the merchants by virtue of the cultural artifact they represented. The expensive and culturally significant presence of the nautch girls

¹¹¹ A. W. Stiffe, "Former Trading Centres of the Persian Gulf. V. Kung," *The Geographical Journal* 13, no. 3 (March 1899): 294-297.

¹¹² Stiffe, 296.

¹¹³ Stiffe, 296.

was to rubber stamp the merchants mission and ensure that the mercantile purpose they were on was correct. As such the nautch went far beyond legitimizing the power of a local noble or Raja, and further still beyond that of overawing and culturally intimidating onlookers: they had the ability to provide rightness of course to mundane things such as mercantile operations.

A further form of nautch utilization, much different than those previously discussed, was exemplified by their use by the Junior Râni of Travancore when she threw a nautch to celebrate the Queen's Jubilee.¹¹⁴ The appearance of the nautch girls here, taken from Rolleston's assertion, could be taken literally that the Junior Râni was attempting to show that her actions of supporting the Queen's Jubilee were correct. The Junior Râni's usage of the nautch here also parallels the Raja who attempted to overawe Col. Davidson. Where Davidson was an outsider being overcome by the nautch as an extension of the local Raja's power, the Junior Râni was also utilizing the nautch to overawe and impress cultural magnitude upon her observers. Therefore the nautch were there to both woo outsiders, or impress the cultural relic of the nautch onto the colonizer victims, as well as provide credibility and correctness of action. Intriguingly, the presence of these nautches was held for, "a select number of the respectable ladies of the neighbourhood on the day of the Queen's Jubilee."¹¹⁵ The source does not say if these women were white British colonizers or affluent and important native women, however the audience of the nautch can be inferred by the language utilized by the source in protection of the viewers.

The usage of the word "respectability" and the source specifically mentioning that the ladies in witness to the nautch were indeed respectable, lends credence to them being white colonizers. The idea of the nautch not being respectable was a primary tenant of the anti-nautch movement. Specifically mentioning these ladies as respectable therefore, was an attempt by the

¹¹⁴ "Report on native papers in the Madras presidency," *South Asia Open Archives*, 03-13-1887, pg. 12.

¹¹⁵ "Report on native papers," (1887), pg 12.

source to cut off detractors who would simply handwave off such an event as local barbarism.¹¹⁶ If the “respectable ladies” in attendance had been natives, it was very likely that the term “respectable” would not have been utilized. Therefore the Junior Râni’s utilization of the nautch girls was an attempt to overawe the colonial female, lends a new critical aspect to their utilization. The ability for the nautch to impress the colonial male, by virtue of the proximity of subaltern brown bodies moving in close proximity to the white colonizer male body, had an intrinsic sexual component of domination that was obvious (such as Swettenham’s account). The Junior Râni’s usage of the nautch to specifically woo female colonial elites, showed that the nautch girls were more than capable of having specific and measurable impacts on both male and female spectators, and that their power was derived from a much more complicated and discerning source than mere sexual prowess. As will be discussed in Chapter 2 and utilizing Charn Jagpal’s analysis, the specific use of nautch girls to overawe female gendered onlookers was achieved by directly showing females (the nautch girls) who have more intrinsic rights, freedom (both sexual and literal), power, and money than the imperial feminine. Their usage in this case by the Junior Râni is not only to impress the onlookers, but to lend authority and correctness to a colonizer event.

The nautch had acted as more than a mere spectacle, they were simultaneously a harmonizing force and source of legitimacy of action. Utilization of the nautch by the Junior Râni revealed two possibilities: that the Junior Rani of Travancore wanted to show her support for the Queen was correct and right in terms of cultural appropriateness, and that she thought that the nautch girls could help harmonize the cultural friction. What is validating for the nautch is that the Junior Rani clearly thought that their presence was needed or required to help bolster her own decision and power. The nautch therefore, acted as a bridge between the two dichotomous

¹¹⁶ “Report on native papers,” (1887), pg 12.

power structures through the agency of their own unique cultural power and prowess. The ability to confer harmony, righteousness of action, and increase the power and prestige of their employer represented a prodigious amount of influence and power. In this case, the nautch girls were being used as a source of power by the Junior Rani, but for the benefit of the British. Whilst the Junior Rani was a native figure utilizing the nautch, the fact that she attempted to utilize them to bestow cultural sanctity upon the British clearly showed that, for the colonizer in this case, the power transaction taking place flowed in the wrong direction.

In the same way that the British attempted to install a visible hierarchy in terms of enforcement of cultural supremacy and epistemological frameworks of power, the colonized culture would offer up their own source of agency and supremacy: resistance in the form of the nautch girls. In 1887, to “express satisfaction” with Maharaja Partap Singh, the British bestowed upon him two titles Lieutenant-Colonel and Aide-de-Camp to the Prince of Wales.¹¹⁷ This came at a time when there is particular unrest in the greater region due to Maharaja Dalip Singh and his “preposterous desire to regain possession of the Panjab[sic].”¹¹⁸ The British were utilizing their granting of titles (or specific cultural recognition) to those subaltern commanders who were more palatable to the empire. The act of granting titles itself was a cultural marker for the perceived direction of cultural authority and flow of power. Those that were superior had the ability to confer or denote titles upon those “beneath” them. While this was an attempt to co-opt some help with a region that was experiencing turmoil, the cultural statement of superiority via the granting of titles was indelible. The British were looking for assistance whilst simultaneously reinforcing the markers of the cultural strata of power. The report mentioned that, “the title is a

¹¹⁷ “Selections from the Vernacular Newspapers Published in the Panjab, North-Western Provinces, Oudh, Central Provinces and Berar,” *South Asia Open Archives*, pg. 420, 07-11-1887.

¹¹⁸ “Selections from the Vernacular,” (1887), pg 413.

military one, and was not hitherto bestowed on any native.”¹¹⁹ The report also stated that in the act of granting this, that it made the Maharaja’s own title “significant” and that without it he would be relegated a *kasai* or butcher without having this title as his weapon.¹²⁰ This was a prodigious act of validation by the British on behalf of the Maharaja Partap Singh, and clearly the act of conferring titles implied superiority on those with the ability to grant them. However, the current of cultural flow can go in both directions.

In the defense of the colonized culture and as a recognition of the cultural transaction and perceived flow of power that was taking place, the British source for this event went out of its way to denote that a nautch was given at the end of the ceremony.¹²¹ There can be multiple cultural interpretations as to the specific mentioning of the nautch in this source. Once again, the source went out of its way to specifically recognize it as being a nautch, not entertainment or reverie, but that the “darbar[sic] ended with a nautch.”¹²² The power of the nautch was being utilized as a rubber stamp of approval on the cultural transaction taking place. Having the nautch perform at the end of what is hitherto a unique granting of titles, gave it rightness and a sense of cultural correctness, however this was the colonized culture grafting rightness onto the colonizer. The power of the nautch could be taken to act in myriad ways simultaneously. They were at once a source of cultural harmonization in bridging the gap between the colonizer and the colonized and they were also facilitating the cultural transaction that was taking place by lending it authority and credence. They could also be understood as acting as a counterbalance to the superior image the British cultivated in their giving of titles to a native. In this sense, the prowess of the nautch showed cultural and subaltern resistance to the supposed cultural superiority: if the

¹¹⁹ “Selections from the Vernacular,” (1887), pg 420.

¹²⁰ “Selections from the Vernacular,” (1887), pg 420.

¹²¹ “Selections from the Vernacular,” (1887), pg 420.

¹²² “Selections from the Vernacular,” (1887), pg 420.

nautch weren't there and didn't lend their credence, the bestowal of titles would lack the intrinsic cultural rightness that the nautch girls granted. In other words, as the British were deigning to designate titles upon a colonized person, the nautch were culturally authorizing the transaction. The direction of power flow for this event was therefore quite muddled and beset with issues of interpretation as to who was superior to whom.

Therefore the nautch, in their interactions with the British, can be viewed as being highly dichotomous. They were harmonizing and bridging the gap between the cultures and acted as a validating force for cultural interactions to take place. In the same breath, and with subtle undertones that are typically missed by the colonizer, they were inserting themselves as a font of colonized power. Through their act of validating the British, they were not only attempting to create cultural harmony and reduce friction between the supposed superior and the inferior (denoted by the granting of titles), the cultural superiority of the nautch girls was intrinsically implied and possibly overshadowed the colonizer view of the event. The British were using them as a function of power, but in the act of being used to validate British power in the denoting of these special titles, the nautch were simultaneously creating both harmony and friction.

The power and dichotomy of the nautch girls can be inferred even from the less grand ceremonies, such as mere visits from culturally significant individuals from the colonizing culture. In 1870, the Duke of Edinburgh visited Cylon, modern day Sri Lanka. The people of Ceylon, "displayed a great deal of enthusiasm" in learning that the Duke would visit.¹²³ The local government wanted to "put up a show worthy of the occasion" as well, and attempted to find a presumably white patron to guide the Duke in his visit; however, no such person was found and they were forced to use "local bodies".¹²⁴ Cultural cross-pollination was highly visible, the Royal

¹²³ A. C. Dep. *A History of the Ceylon police* (Colombo: Times of Ceylon, 1938): 53. From South Asia Open Archives, 01-01-1938.

¹²⁴ Dep. 53.

Outriders were outfitted magnificently in their “tartar dress boots”.¹²⁵ The cultural exchange then headed to the Alfred House where the, “Hindu Nautch girls attired in gorgeous but apparently uncomfortable garments performed.”¹²⁶ Their hiring by the colonial government of Ceylon suggested that the local leaders required more pomp and circumstance to the celebration, and thus engaged the nautch girls for their service. In doing so, they were being hired by the British to ostensibly show wealth and their own power (in being able to engage and afford the nautch), but unwittingly invited the nautch to give their own cultural approval and stamp of rightness to the celebration. The colonizers had ceded considerable cultural power and subverted their own cause in the appropriation and attempted usurpation of the nautch girls. Multiple displays of native culture were present at the celebration for the Duke’s coming, however none of the native subaltern performers had the same intrinsic power and cultural authority as the nautch girls. Even if the local government was unaware of the full extent and depth of the cultural power the nautch girls engendered, at least some of it must have been perceived for the local government to engage their services. If the nautch girls were deemed important enough to hire (or to be understood on at least some level by the colonizers), then the absence of their power must too have been felt.

In 1920, well into the anti-nautch movement and the lessening of their status, the Central Khilafat Committee held a meeting in Bombay as to the matter of protest via non-cooperation.¹²⁷ Cultural flow and counterflows were on wide display in the author's interpretation of the article. It was noted in the source that if they, the colonized Muhammadans, were to attempt a policy of non-cooperation and boycotting, that the rich Muhammadans should be aware that it entails

¹²⁵ Dep, 55.

¹²⁶ Dep, 55.

¹²⁷ “Report on native papers for the week ending 5th June 1920,” *South Asia Open Archives*, 06-05-1920, pg. 11.

giving up their motor cars and neckties.¹²⁸ In a poetic statement the meeting declared that, “the hearts of Moslems are torn asunder by the injustice done to them by the Allies.”¹²⁹ In order to avenge themselves of the perceived wrongs inflicted on them by the colonizing forces, and in order to strike back and inflict some type of damage or reparation:

“...the Central Khilafat Committee should pass a resolution to the effect that all Muhammadans should refrain from indulging in banquets, illuminations and dances of nautch-girls on the occasion of wedding festivities so long as the Khilafat question is not settled in a satisfactory manner.”¹³⁰

The Central Khilafat Committee was threatening to de-value the ceremonies that the nautch girls legitimized and amplified by their presence, by removing them. For this to be of any practical use by the Committee, the colonizers would have to have understood, on at least some level, that the presence of the nautch girls at these ceremonies went beyond simply showing ostentatious wealth. In this source, the removal of the ability to have nautch girls present at their ceremonies was mentioned in the same breath as boycotting, non-cooperation, and *hijrat* (voluntary movement of peoples). As such, clearly the removal of the nautch girls from use by the British, was seen as a large enough cultural punch so as to make the colonizers think about the wrongs they had inflicted. Their removal also implied that the nautch girls were not only important to colonizer ceremonial circumstances and the amplification of the colonizer power, but that the colonizers themselves were aware that the nautch girls were providing something more than merely dancing and entertainment.

Context and Conversations, Issues of Power and Culture

¹²⁸ “Report on native papers,” (1920), pg. 11.

¹²⁹ “Report on native papers,” (1920), pg. 11.

¹³⁰ “Report on native papers,” (1920), pg. 11.

“Despite the often bombastic rhetoric surrounding colonial rule, the European governing elites experienced a pervasive sense of vulnerability about the fragility of colonial power.”¹³¹ The presence and utilization of the nautch girls within the colonizer epistemological framework of power only worked to exacerbate any potential concerns with the fragility of rule. The knowledge structure of an imperial society must be able to integrate native data in terms that conform to their own colonizer expectations. The “reordering of ‘raw’ or primitive data into the local conventions of European narrative and formal utterance,” was critical to establishing a solid throughline as to the direction which power should flow.¹³² As a cultural relic of inherited power, the nautch girls’ own epistemological structure did not allow for quick and easy recategorization and inclusion into the colonizer structure. “All cultures tend to make representations of foreign cultures the better to master or in some way control them.”¹³³ The inability to be molded or somehow shaped into a form that colonial power structures could more easily recognize, lead to an incorrect interpretation and incorporation of the nautch girls themselves. This then largely explained why the British utilized the nautch girls without realizing that they, in their ability to confer rightness of action, were not representing a throughline between power structures, but were themselves incompatible with structures of colonial power knowledge. The attempts at usurpation and utilization by the British only accomplished an introduction of a competing power structure within colonial systems, one that was gendered, subaltern, and not compatible with colonizer frameworks.

Tensions and anxieties arose from this cross-pollination of cultures. The two competing power structures represented an interior frontier, one that was “compelling precisely because of

¹³¹ Jessica Hinchy, *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c. 1850-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 27.

¹³² Said, 99.

¹³³ Said, 99.

its contradictory connotations.”¹³⁴ The introduction of a competing power structure that could not be properly interrogated and digested into the imperial framework created a danger of cultural hybridity: a place where possibly insidious (from the imperial lens) native ideas could thrive as a result of the anxiety and misplacement of the native data. The nautch girls and other courtesans “have uniquely combined the elements of struggle for their material needs with those of an ideological struggle against patriarchal values, by creating and hiding behind their many masks.”¹³⁵ Critical to the idea that the internal frontier was a dangerous one for the id of the colonizer, was that the courtesans “live[d] in outward harmony with male power...for the struggle can only be effective if their subterfuges are mistaken for compliance...”¹³⁶ The nautch girls outwardly accepted the British invitations to show their craft at important events not only for the prodigious wealth, but as an act of resistance and as an infiltration of the colonizer structure. At once they were feigning subjugation while attempting an assertion of their own power structure. There was an idea of what “successful Anglo-imperial world power looks like” in terms of perceptions.¹³⁷ This perception or idea of success was not contiguous with native structure elements that possessed gendered power—thus the need for nautch girl subterfuge. These interior frontiers of the empire, where the power structures and their corresponding attempts at integration and reordering, represented a cultural and gendered space where the specific relations of the colonizer and colonized were either “confounded or confirmed.”¹³⁸ The inherent prowess of the nautch girls within this framework, their imperative of applying their power with subterfuge and perhaps a tint of perfidiousness, rendered them unable to be

¹³⁴ Cooper and Stoler, 198.

¹³⁵ Oldenburg, “Lifestyle as Resistance,” 281.

¹³⁶ Oldenburg, “Lifestyle as Resistance,” 281.

¹³⁷ Antoinette Burton, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 82.

¹³⁸ Ann Laura Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies,” *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (Dec. 2001): 830-831.

adequately defined by the colonizer. Those whose responsibility it was, who claimed to be experts on nativism and were the main interpreters for both dialogue and character, were the ones who were most “fatally deceived.”¹³⁹ The power structures between the colonizer and the nautch girls were wholly incompatible. That the colonizer still attempted to utilize and usurp the power of the nautch girls created an interior frontier fraught with peril for the colonizers, especially if the nautch girls proved superior to their own ideas of power.

¹³⁹ Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 52

Chapter 2

This chapter discusses and analyzes critical interactions between the nautch girls and the colonizing culture. The case studies utilized feature the nautch girls being interpreted and understood by the colonizing culture, exposing paradoxes, reversing colonial ideas of the colonized, and uprooting ideas of superiority. In particular, direct comparisons took place in the Empire's newspapers, and offered public discussions and an open questioning of whose cultural aspects were superior.

Superiority, Colonizer Benevolence, and Paradoxes

Sir John Strachey, an eventual provincial governor, maintained that the purpose of the British in India was benevolent.¹⁴⁰ Inherent in this idea of a “benevolent” rule was the intrinsic superiority of the ruler and inferiority of those to be governed. Expansionist Western empires can be predicated on the notion that not only was the drastic overtaking of distant lands important, in terms of monetary and trading value, but that those “distant territories and their native people *should* be subjugated.”¹⁴¹ Therefore it was a type of manifest destiny that the subaltern peoples be ruled by the “inherently superior” Western whites. Notions of superiority and benevolence not only provided the purpose and authority to conquer and rule, but legitimation. These ideas that spring forth from benevolence are tied to colonial structures that upheld superiority of the colonizer as a primary tenant. Therefore, according to contemporary William Hunter, “the British had rescued the Subcontinent from the chaos caused by the decline and disintegration of the Mughal Empire...”¹⁴² The implied superiority of benevolence and the ability to rule is palpable,

¹⁴⁰ David Gilmour, *The British in India: A Social History of the Raj* (New York: Picador, 2018), 23.

¹⁴¹ Said, 10.

¹⁴² Gilmour, 23.

and is exactly what was being impressed upon the governed, as evidenced earlier in this thesis by the interpretation of empire by Lee Kuan Yew.¹⁴³

Susan M. Ryan's work on benevolence and the critical inferences which can be drawn from its usage in empire—though she focuses on American or Anglo-American applications of it—are exceedingly instructive as to why the British would specifically utilize it as a driving force. Benevolence, as understood as a “cultural paradigm” can be utilized to provide the citizens of the empire with, “ways of understanding, describing, and constructing their racial and national identities.”¹⁴⁴ The nautch girls did not fall into the category of the “neat division of benevolent agent from object,” they suffered from an “ambiguous positioning,” within the colonial structure.¹⁴⁵ In the ruling of India, there were policies of principles that were inculcated within the various constituents that were “providing a collective blueprint to legitimize the Anglo authority and superiority.”¹⁴⁶ Whilst the author Verity McInnis specifically relates this imperial blueprint to the women building homes in India (who were in the process of domesticating the empire), the pervasiveness of the tenant that superiority was a central component of the benevolence of empire was exposed. It was not only the cultural power and prowess of the nautch girls that prevented their assimilation into this blueprint, their inherent superiority directly contested the underpinnings of the entire idea of the benevolence of empire.

On the Indian subcontinent, the British Empire made it a critical necessity to culturally emulate the empires they were attempting to supplant: the Mughals, Marathas, and others. By emulating their forebears and eventually bringing the nautch girls into their own homes, the British Empire had not only attempted to show continuity between the old rulers and the new, but

¹⁴³ Pike, 317.

¹⁴⁴ Susan M. Ryan, *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race & the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence* (New York: Cornell University Press), 5.

¹⁴⁵ Ryan, 141.

¹⁴⁶ Verity G. McInnis, “Indirect Agents of Empire: Army Officers' Wives in British India and the American West, 1830-1879,” *Pacific Historical Review* 83, no. 3 (August 2014): 396.

also showed a form of cultural domination via the enforcement of stereotypes. In this way the nautch girls worked as a tool to signify not only a temporal through line, but an indicator of masculine superiority of the white body over the brown body. However, by emulating the culture of the Mughals and Indian rulers before them, the British Empire was paradoxically and perhaps unknowingly, upsetting their own view on cultural supremacy. If the cultural framework of the British Empire was indeed supreme, it would not be necessary to model themselves after an “inferior” people or culture.¹⁴⁷ The mere fact that they had to, spoke to the paradoxical weakness of the cultural underpinnings of the empire and that specific notion of supremacy. Figure one shows an employee of the British India Company, Colonel Antoine Louis Henri Polier doing his best to imitate the Mughal rulers by having nautch girls perform at a high class party. However, in doing so he dressed like the culture that he is supposedly superior to, sitting on the floor like the supposed “inferior” culture, and was being influenced by the nautch girls. The cultural transference flowed in both directions, as is evident from the painting. Paradoxically via this painting, we see the cracks of the supremacy of the British Empire's cultural hegemony in full view of all. A supposed superior culture should never have to mimic an inferior culture. The presence of the nautch girls in such a way would lead to further indications of the weakness and internal contradictions within the empire.

¹⁴⁷ Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, utilized throughout this work is instructional as to this point. Throughout the beginning of his book, ideas that empire not only can civilize the less advanced or inferior peoples, but indeed *should* lend important insight as to the purposes and justifications of empire. Throughout, the idea that one culture is “superior” and one is “inferior” is intrinsic, and an essential part of the blueprint of empire.



Figure 1 - Col. Polier's Nautch¹⁴⁸

The attempt to make the nautch girls a cultural inferior and submissive, represented a “concerted attempt to legitimize the supremacy of *Homo sapiens* (often as white and male bodies) through symbolic and material mastery...”¹⁴⁹ Mastery was integral to the cultural imperial code as well as to the visible superiority of ostentatiously having nautch girls perform. British travelers in their journals frequently offered personalized opinions of this visible superiority. Lt.-Colonel of Engineers in Bengal, C.J.C. Davidson Esq. (briskly discussed in Chapter 1) and his travel writings were a particularly nuanced and self-aware account of the nautch girls. Davidson was well aware of the typical outcry of those that favored imperial culture when an alternate cultural aspect was held to be superior. He acknowledged that those with

¹⁴⁸ Mihr Chand, *Col. Polier's Nautch* c.1780. Lucknow, c. 1780, gouache on paper, 25.5 x 16.5 cm, presumably after a painting by Tilly Kettle, Faizabad, 1772 (London, India Office Library and Records) found in *Arts of the Islamic Book: The Collection of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan*, by Anthony Welch and Stuart Cary Welch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press for the Asia Society, 1982), p. 128.

¹⁴⁹ Antoinette Burton and Renisa Mawani, “Introduction: Animals, Disruptive Imperial Histories, and the Bestiary Form,” in *Animalia* (Duke University Press, 2020), 12.

opposing views could claim that the traveler's own view, opinion, or taste had been "corrupted", or perhaps they had even stayed too long and "gone native".¹⁵⁰ Processing the idea of "tainted" further, the only reason they (Davidson) could favor the nautch and local culture, placing them as superior to the colonizer culture, was a degradation of moral fortitude—specifically his own. Such an idea or juxtaposition of superiority was merely a fulfillment of the imperial idea that Davidson went native; however Davidson wisely cut off his detractors and acknowledged the common trope and rebutted it by directly stating that he did not consider himself to have gone native. In his own perception, only someone who was blind could miss the truth of his account of cultural displacement and counterflow.¹⁵¹

Therefore Davidson stood as someone with intimate knowledge of the cultural relic of the nautch (having viewed scores), as well as someone who held knowledge of imperial colonial structures of suppression.¹⁵² In the same breath, Davidson stated that the reception that had been prepared for him (by the Raja) was a group of "fierce barbarians" accompanied by their "villanous[sic] instruments".¹⁵³ Davidson was attempting to soften what he was about to state (the superiority of the colonized), and was trying to align himself with the more contemporaneous view held by the colonizer. Here he specifically called out and degraded the colonized as an attempt to yield and ensure the acceptability of his next statement, and show that he has not been "tainted" when he stated that: "My taste has not been corrupted by a long residence in India...rather it has been perfected...the better order of Nautch girls shew[sic] the highest grace, and elegance in their fascinating movements."¹⁵⁴ By having qualified his promotion of the colonized culture by labeling the initial viewing as "villanous[sic]", he

¹⁵⁰ Davidson, 155.

¹⁵¹ Davidson, 156.

¹⁵² Davidson, 161-162.

¹⁵³ Davidson, 155.

¹⁵⁴ Davidson, 155.

attempted to assuage the fears that his readers had of him having gone native. Davidson being specifically cognizant of the “taint” that he was professing, as well as him being well aware he was going against what was expected of his opinions, only lends credence to his claim of the overt superiority of the colonized culture to that of the colonizer.

The colonizer view of positive interpretations being tainted pairs well with Anjali Arondekar’s analysis and conversation of Johannes Fabian. The particular silencing and obfuscation of valid interpretations of the colonized culture, is required by the colonizer and the epistemological structures present in the imperial system. Cultural and positive expression of the colonized is greatly dampened if those reading it could merely dismiss it as “taint”. Much like “fake news” of today, “going native” or “being tainted” is a slur of the highest order intended to belittle and besmirch with no factual checking nor personal introspection. In terms of both anthropological discourse and cultural significance, the colonized must always be in the continual “process of disappearing.”¹⁵⁵ Relegating positive opinions to having had become naturalized enhanced this process of supplanting colonized culture with the colonizer’s: it offered an easy way out of particular cultural binds that may show the colonizer as less advanced than the colonized. Davidson, in his recollection of the performance, was hoping to qualify his statement and judgment of the overt superiority of the colonized culture (embodied by the nautch girls) by relegating those not directly involved (the men surrounding them) to the level of savages. He was struggling with the paradox and counterflow he had witnessed, at once it should be savage, but at the same moment it was clearly superior. He therefore offered his “savage” preamble as a justification in recognition of a much more modern concept: “Western society can thus only move forward by the relegation of the savage to a signifier that was – and cannot

¹⁵⁵ Arondekar, *For the Record*, 56.

be.”¹⁵⁶ With his “savage” qualifier, Davidson was able to be truthful as to what he saw as an overt superiority without going native. Thus Davidson offered a clear view of the colonized culture showing superiority and counterflow against the colonizer, as his record exists not only outside of official colonial archival discrimination and the purview of the governmental magister, but he was cogent of possible silences his specific claim engendered.

Davidson’s claim of the nautch girls being “matchless” and of such a magnificence that those that would not acknowledge the nautch must be a “blind idolator”, announced that he was firmly in support of the nautch girls as something superior.¹⁵⁷ He again offered these opinions with another qualifying statement, so as to not merit the status of “tainted”. In offering the nautch girls as the highest of female form, he qualified the statement by saying their expressionless faces were inferior to that of his own “countrywomen”.¹⁵⁸ In his effort to appeal to the reader as to the nautch girls being matchless and that those who did not acknowledge the fact are blind, was a statement that again attempted to make the superiority of the colonized more palatable. He was defending his own opinion by having offered a concession to the British reader. These concessions Davidson offered were important to both warding off the inevitable silences of taint and morality, but the fact that he offered repeated concessions throughout was again a recognition of his own claim being a form of counterflow. Every positive statement he made about the nautch girls that was so grand—“matchless...compares with the statue that enchants the world...and that they must be acknowledged”—he carefully qualified with a slight concession so as to not earn the silences he must have been aware of.¹⁵⁹ Davidson’s account was in direct conflict with ideas of imperial feminism. Similar to how the traveling ayah provided a visible

¹⁵⁶ Arondekar, *For the Record*, 56.

¹⁵⁷ Davidson, 156.

¹⁵⁸ Davidson, 156.

¹⁵⁹ Davidson, 155-156.

indication of the failure of the cultural framework underpinning the empire, the high status and highly visible nature of the nautch girl culturally undermined the idea of the superiority of British imperial feminism in terms of standing and rights.¹⁶⁰ British women, of the supposed superior British empire, were supposed to have been seen as the most advanced version of feminine in the world. The nautch girls were “seen as having political, social, financial, educational, and sexual liberties that other Indian and British women did not.”¹⁶¹ Here again, the nautch girls and their power ran counter to the imperial narrative.

In his travels, Davidson constructed his own epistemological framework that directly clashed with colonial visions of cultural superiority. Davidson was well aware that he was offering up what amounts to contamination of the prevailing colonial knowledge formations.¹⁶² By offering his validating statements, he was taking his opinion of the nautch perhaps one-step further than he was even aware of. While offering his opinions on the superiority of the nautch in terms of beauty, sexual chasteness, and being morally unassailable, he provided multiple data points that put the nautch higher on the cultural pedestal than the colonizer. However, by specifically and preemptively defending them from colonizer opposition, he was reversing the dominant ideology of utilizing native or colonized vices to contain a native or colonized threat.¹⁶³ As the colonizer became more entrenched on the subcontinent, colonial reports, “became routinized, personal observation more central, and the terrain of intelligence gathering rife with issues of mediation and reliability.”¹⁶⁴ Davidson was therefore mediating his own argument (and stepping in as biased magister) in favor of his own positive view of the nautch. He provided a

¹⁶⁰ Arunima Datta, “Responses to traveling Indian ayahs in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 71 (2021): 103.

¹⁶¹ Jagpal, “I Mean to Win’,” 5.

¹⁶² Arondekar, *For the Record*, 59.

¹⁶³ Arondekar, *For the Record*, 44.

¹⁶⁴ Arondekar, *For the Record*, 51.

record that was stunning in its own recognition of the zeitgeist of the temporal and political issues that may have sought to undo his construction of how the nautch girls appeared.

Davidson's eventual malformation and misjudgement of the nautch girls may have been precisely the goal of the nautch girls. Davidson's acknowledgement of any kind of subaltern superiority was a recognition that the something that is the nautch girls' cultural superiority existed within the colonial system. Arondekar would identify this as a "problem-event": even something that was a misjudgement or misinterpretation regarding minoritized knowledge formations was critical, as it provided verification that whatever that something was, was present in the system.¹⁶⁵ By merely identifying the nautch girls and giving them credence, Davidson was forging their identities through his lens via the idiom of judgment, whilst simultaneously confirming their presence. Even his eventual incorrect interpretation (his missing of the nautch girls denoting correctness) "stabilizes and organizes the (failed) singularities of colonial knowledge."¹⁶⁶ Confirmation that his patriarchal and colonized views landed short of the truth could be seen in what happens next in his meeting with the local Raja. The Raja then coaxed them to go on an elephant ride for a tour of the city, directly after the nautch performance. Here, Davidson's fear and timidity (and his own honesty with himself) in the face of the colonized culture shone through. Davidson, whilst climbing the elephant, meekly asked the Raja to hold on and inquired if the animal could be trusted; the Raja's answer was a hearty laugh.¹⁶⁷ The Raja was laughing as the elephants were doing their work as a projection of the Raja's power and gravitas. The elephants were overawing the colonizer with their majesty, size, and very overt power; but the nautch girls had overawed the colonizer with their own overt superiority and prowess, affecting the attitudes and notions of supremacy of the colonizer.

¹⁶⁵ Arondekar, *For the Record*, 68.

¹⁶⁶ Arondekar, *For the Record*, 68.

¹⁶⁷ Davidson, 163.

Instead of detracting and minimizing, Davidson's own cultural awareness only lent credence to what he did not say, and made the silences that he did offer more meaningful when properly extracted from the source. Davidson was actively aware that he was providing evidence to contradict established colonial epistemological formations, and worked his best to sway his reader that what he had witnessed was truly exceptional. Therefore the silences that he offered as recompense for the colonizer ego further add to the gravity of what he had witnessed. His judgment, even though well meaning, rendered an incomplete view that suffered similar silences and issues as a more traditional archival source. British historian Carolyn Steedman would say that Davidson was "blissfully unaware of the precise components of his '*Dust*', yet he breathed it in."¹⁶⁸ Davidson was absolutely unaware of the true function of the nautch girls and their performance for the Raja. His own silences regarding the true nature of the nautch girls only lend credence to their subversive formations of soft-power. Innocuous as they may have seemed to Davidson, they were still part of the complex plot of the Raja that left Davidson, in his own words, literally cheering for the colonized.

Newspapers throughout the British Empire have offered their opinions on the nautch girls to their discerning imperial citizens, and their views and statements often showed the nautch girls as being superior to whatever they are being compared with. The most propinquitous and easily digestible comparison was against other dancing troupes or types of dances. An 1838 newspaper reports that, "both in the style of their dress and the decorum of their conduct, the Hindoo[sic] dancing-girls are infinitely superior to the ladies of the *corps de ballet* at home."¹⁶⁹ After the onset of the anti-nautch movement (one in which their moral quality would be constantly in

¹⁶⁸ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Colonial History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 163. Davidson in his recounting of the instance of meeting the nautch girls, is too caught up in the nautch and the cultural issues unfolding to properly realize that he was being affected by the very thing he was witnessing.

¹⁶⁹ "The Bayaderes," *The Era*. Oct. 14, 1838.

question), newspapers were still representing the nautch girls in superior terms. Cognizant of this moral attack upon the nautch girls, British interpretation of the nautch dance in terms of societal evil understood the nautch dance to be less evil and damaging than their own European balls:

“The Indian nautch is at best injurious to the male sex only; the European ball corrupts both men and women.”¹⁷⁰ Well past the temporal beginnings of the anti-nautch movement, newspapers in colonized Australia were directly confronting the question of overt superiority and the moral correctness of the nautch girls. An article from New South Wales stated that the dance itself was not evil, but that evil was ascribed to it based upon moral standings (influenced by the anti-nautch movement).¹⁷¹ A common trope of the newspapers was to compare ballroom dances to the dance of the nautch girls. The same New South Wales newspaper further claimed that the ballroom dances of Europe were much more evil as they were little more than “un-dresses.”¹⁷² Direct comparisons between the colonizer and colonized that confirmed the preference of the latter, were representative of prodigious counterflow and confirm the overt superiority being claimed by the nautch girls.

British interpretations and reflections on this cultural counterflow went far beyond the realms of dress, dance, and morality. Nautch girls (and Indian women in general) were not assimilating or had no desire to change their habits to match those of the women in the West. The careful training of the nautch was such that they are taught a “high ideal of womanhood” and were taught to “read, write, and keep accounts.”¹⁷³ Though they “see a good deal of the outer world” they chose not to change their life and inherit new ideas, modes and customs for what

¹⁷⁰ “Report on native papers for the week ending 10th June 1893.,” *South Asia Open Archives*, 06-10-1893, pg. 25.

¹⁷¹ “To Nautch or not to Nautch,” *The Blue Mountain Echo* (NSW) Mar. 18, 1921.

¹⁷² “To Nautch or not to Nautch,” 1921.

¹⁷³ S. E. J. Clarke, Gleeson White, and W. M. Acworth, “Journal of the Society for Arts, Vol. 43, no. 2204,” *The Journal of the Society of Arts* 43, no. 2204 (Feb. 15, 1895): 271.

“we naturally suppose the superior status of women in the West.”¹⁷⁴ This contemporary account had acknowledged out loud that the cultural flow of power, the blueprint of benevolence, was flowing in the wrong direction. The various freedoms of the nautch girl as well as their trappings of soft power and cultural resonance, produced a gendered form of prowess that proved troublesome to even understand for the British Empire, let alone to truly usurp or contain. The benevolent blueprint thus encountered a significant hurdle in that, “...the nautch girl became an anomalous Indian woman who lived more freely and happily than the white woman sequestered in her Anglo-Indian bungalow.”¹⁷⁵ These issues in understanding and correctly interpreting the nautch girls only magnified the anxiety felt by the colonizer.

Anxiety existed somewhat early in the imperial consciousness due to the inability to properly understand and define the nautch girls. A greater understanding of the nautch girls was present as a function of time, for instance in 1811 a newspaper was only able to establish the connection of the nautch girls to opulence, and not the cultural approval they gave nor any other aspect of their power.¹⁷⁶ However by 1907, there was at least some type of more critical understanding held by some, as the anti-nautch movement was deemed as being successful as “the position of the nautch is no longer what it was in the Indian social system.”¹⁷⁷ There was at least some level of cultural understanding gained by the colonizer, even if it was limited, over the many years of oppression. Throughout this timeline however, newspapers and ideals would constantly conflict as the imperial citizens and social structure of the empire attempted to understand the cultural relic that was amongst them and showcased colonized superiority.

¹⁷⁴ Clarke, 271.

¹⁷⁵ Jagpal, “Going Nautch Girl,” 254.

¹⁷⁶ “Calcutta Nautches,” *Government Gazette* (India), Oct. 24 1811.

¹⁷⁷ “The Nautch Girl,” *Maitland Daily Mercury* (NSW), Dec. 2 1891.

Clear and overt superiority of the colonizer as well defined aspects of inferiority and placement of the colonized are prerequisites for the blueprint of an empire attempting to utilize the principles of benevolence. Without the aspect of superiority, the entire moral justification and beneficent masking for the empire falls apart. The cultural resistance as well as overt superiority of certain aspects of the cultural conflict, worked to disabuse the British of their notions of validating superiority. Attempts by the British to mask this failing came as “...English-language education was instituted to make English texts the original source of moral values.”¹⁷⁸ What could not be established firmly (moral superiority, general superiority of culture) was to then be instilled through institutionalized education. What should have been obvious for a colonized culture had to be manually asserted via education. Education utilized in this way was a direct recognition that the colonized culture was not accepting wholesale that their supposed betters really were “better”. Notions of superiority and benevolence worked in tandem to both supply the colonizer with justification whilst simultaneously supplying the colonized with reverential awe and submission. Therefore the overt superiority of the nautch girls, in their various forms, stood as anathema to the British Empire and their framework of power. The Empire’s various attempts at utilizing the nautch girls as a font of power stood as a great sin against the very idea of benevolent superiority, and served to further magnify the cultural counterflow. This counterflow, enhanced by the various misunderstandings of the British with regards to the nautch girls, would lead to critical issues of anxiety and mimicry forming outside the subcontinent and throughout the empire.

¹⁷⁸ Arondekar, *For the Record*, 50.

Conclusion

In this chapter I turn to some concluding arguments to further the idea of cultural counterflow that the nautch girls engendered. It was paramount for the British Empire's dominance to be continually reinforcing ideas of benevolence and the intrinsic superiority of the colonizer. The paradoxical strength of the nautch girls created intense anxiety amongst the colonizer culture and produced questions about their framework of power. Borders and boundaries were crossed by the nautch girls in unique ways that only magnified the cultural intimidation. Mimicry, the ultimate form of cultural submission, presented a particularly strong problem for colonizer culture.

Anxiety, Mimicry, and the Moving of Frontiers

Imperial representations of the subaltern reinforced or confirmed the self-imposed and imagined ideas of superiority that were required for the idea of benevolence. Such ideas supported the colonial assumptions that the colonized “deserved” to be colonized owing to their “inferiority”, and were foundational to the idea of colonial benevolence.¹⁷⁹ Superiority not only flowed from the idea of the colonizer being superior, but it also flowed from the colonized being manifestly inferior.¹⁸⁰ In the act of colonizing, education figured as a tool to supplant the moral values of the colonizers upon the colonized. Colonial education of the colonized worked to disrupt minoritized knowledge formations whilst ensuring that the subaltern was always in the process of disappearing.¹⁸¹ The powerful nautch girls, due to both their innate cultural prowess and visible superiority to a number of preconceived imperial notions, forced a challenge to this imperial process of disappearing the colonized. Instantiations of anxiety were highly charged

¹⁷⁹ Said, 106.

¹⁸⁰ Said, 106.

¹⁸¹ Arondekar, *For the Record*, 56.

problem-events that could be held as evidence that not only was a cultural and moralistic issue present in the system, but that it was directly challenging colonizer epistemological frameworks in myriad ways. Examples shown are therefore instances of extreme cultural counterflow, as the nautch girls were not in the process of disappearing (yet), but were highly visible, appearing in imperial places where they had the potential to undermine the very idea of superiority and benevolence. The nautch girls were in the process of moving the internal frontiers (as evidenced by the multitude of nautch “shows”, newspaper discussions, and infiltration of mundane items such as advertisements) of the empire back to the metropol and into the minds and homes of the imperial citizens, and created anxiety across a broad spectrum of imperial consciousness. Cultural and imperial anxiety was only enhanced by the lack of understanding by the colonizer of just what the nautch girls and their cultural relic represented.

The difficulty of understanding the nautch girls was present even within the same source; various sources produced a dichotomy of statements and judgements about the nautch girls that were conflicting. The *Maitland Daily Mercury*, utilized elsewhere, whilst stating overtly that the nautch had declined, then expanded on the difficulty apparent in the rejection of the nautch girls. That same year that the nautch’s standing was declared, “no longer what it once was” saw a nautch girl receive a medal and then performed for thousands of pounds whilst simultaneously earning the ire of Brahmin leaders.¹⁸² In 1894 advertisements (see figure 2) grafted “less than respectable” ballets with the moniker of “naughty nautch”.¹⁸³ That same year Viceroy and Lord Wenlock refused to abstain from appearing at social functions that included nautch girls stating that they were, “not characterised by any impropriety” and “at none of the nautches he has witnessed has anything which in the remotest degree he considered improper.”¹⁸⁴ 1876 saw an

¹⁸² “The Nautch Girl,” *Maitland Daily Mercury* (NSW), Dec. 2 1891.

¹⁸³ “The Ballet Girl,” *The Bulletin*, Nov. 10, 1894.

¹⁸⁴ “Anti-Nautch Movement,” *Telegraph (Brisbane)*, Jan. 5, 1894.

unknown author reviewing the journeys of Frank Vincent Jr that were put forth in the book *Land of the White Elephant*. In the review, the Prince of Wales had his reputation impeded as he had “acted very naughtily in witnessing a similar exhibition (nautch).”¹⁸⁵ The unknown author then defended the knowledge set forth in the travel book (about the nautches), in that it should have been redeeming of the prince. The author was attempting to offer the information about the nautch girls, seen as positive, in an attempt to counteract slanderous accusations about the Prince of Wales attending a nautch and behaving “naughtily”.¹⁸⁶ In the far-flung corners of the British Empire, these newspapers, travel diaries, and journals represented a type of public forum into which the categorization of the nautch girls was attempted. The dichotomy present in these sources, and the back-and-forth contradictory opinions about the nautch, represented a failure of categorization, one that created significant anxiety for the idea of benevolence. The anxiety was then magnified in the extreme in instances where the subaltern appeared as superior.



Figure 2 “Naughty Nautches”¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Unknown Author, “Traversing the Tropics,” *The Aldine* 8, no. 5 (1876): 155.

¹⁸⁶ Unknown Author, “Traversing the Tropics,” 155.

¹⁸⁷ “The Ballet Girl,” *The Bulletin*, Nov. 10, 1894.

Cultural counterflow need not be so overtly large and pertaining only to the elite (such as the princely visits). Innocuous instantiations of the nautch girls being held as superior represented a type of cultural subterfuge. These types of counterflow were particularly potent, as they were indicative of the level of infiltration the nautch girls achieved: having perforated the imperial epistemological framework and overawing the colonizer on an entirely different layer of cultural strata. The nautch were continually utilized as advertisement aides, with multiple issues of furniture and decor magazines touting the nautch as a symbol of the beautiful “east” or “orientalism”. An astute purveyor of oriental rugs even equated the nautch girls as a symbol of wealth while being careful to barbarize and simultaneously disappear the nautch by stating that even though they don’t have railroads or telephones, “the Orientals evidently know what luxury means” whilst “nautch girls dance in the middle of the carpet.”¹⁸⁸ The advertiser had expected the audience to not only be familiar with the nautch girls, but also have a base understanding that they stood for wealth, one of their most basic appendages and interpretations.

Ostentatious presentations of wealth, such as “oriental” rugs, were a natural fit for the nautch girls and their advertising adroitness. However more mundane wares not only pointed to the societal level at which the cultural transactions were now taking place, but represented an implicit understanding of the qualities of the nautch to such a level so that they may be easily identifiable as a signifier of superiority. Roll tickets (the kind used for admission, see figure 3) were advertised as being “Nautch Easy.”¹⁸⁹ The advertiser was attempting to usurp the qualities of the nautch and graft them onto their obviously superior roll tickets, claiming that they were “distinguished for quality and accuracy....and perfect perforations.”¹⁹⁰ The advertiser claimed that they do not use “cheap” or “defective” tickets, but rather that since their targeted buyers

¹⁸⁸ “Art Trades Supplement,” *The Decorator and Furnisher* 18, no. 1 (Apr. 1891): 33.

¹⁸⁹ “Nautch Easy Roll Tickets,” *Everyone’s* 2, no. 100 (Feb. 1922): 1.

¹⁹⁰ “Nautch Easy Roll Tickets,” 1.

have a “demand for accuracy and quality” that they are “nautch easy.”¹⁹¹ Here the nautch girls stood as anathema to such qualities as “defective” or “cheap”. The entire advertisement was dependent on the fact that the principal buyer of these particular roll tickets was not only aware of who the nautch were, but on some level they must be aware of what they represented as well. Contemporary ad agencies strove to get likable celebrities (or people or groups) who were known quantities, to bring their likability and charisma to whatever item was being sold. Similarly, the nautch were understood at the very least, on some level, to have superior qualities that were easily recognizable and thus were readily assimilated into ads by savvy advertisers.

¹⁹¹ “Nautch Easy Roll Tickets,” 1.

Page Two EVERYONE'S incorporating VARIETY and SHOW WORLD February 1, 1922.

FOR GETTING THE MONEY.

"Nautch Easy" Roll Tickets "Nautch Easy"
FOR SAFEGUARDING YOUR BOX-OFFICE



WE illustrate 9 of the most popular styles of our stock lines of Quality "Nautch Easy" Roll Tickets. Distinguished for quality and accuracy in numbering, clear printing and perfect perforations.

We do not sell those "cheap" defective Tickets with their bad perforations and faulty numbering that is causing so much trouble between Managers and Cashiers.

An indication of the confidence placed in our Tickets and of the demand for accuracy and quality is best illustrated by the fact that more than one-half of the Tickets used to-day are "Nautch Easy" tickets.

WE print Non-Counterfeitable Tickets to order in Special Designs. Distinctive Tickets exclusive to your Theatre is our speciality. Designs and Samples submitted---unlimited colors. For orders of not less than 100 rolls, special plates and Engraving is charged at cost and designs are reserved exclusively to your Tickets.

DAILY. OUR TICKET SERVICE COVERS THE SIX STATES. NIGHTLY.

TICKET MACHINES---TICKET BOXES---TICKET CHOPPERS---TICKET DEVICES

Figure 3 - "Nautch Easy"¹⁹²

Cultural permeation was also achieved by the nautch girls, at a truly mundane level, by as early as 1849. In a show of cultural favor and support, a racing horse in Sussex was named "Nautch Girl".¹⁹³ "Nautch Girl" (the horse) was sharing the races with such austere cultural names such as "William the Conqueror", "Solon", and "Champion." The cultural infiltration into the colonizer heartland had reached such a point that race horses were being named after the nautch girls. Their appearance at this level of cultural strata in the metropole suggested

¹⁹² "Nautch Easy Roll Tickets," 1.

¹⁹³ "Goodwood Meeting - Sussex," *York Herald*, Aug. 11, 1849.

prodigious cultural perforation and supplantation. The nautch girls had gone beyond merely impressing and overawing foreign nobles on the subcontinent, but had also achieved significant cultural spread, disrupting knowledge formations in the metropole. Questions of supremacy of culture are found in these mundane items, as well as artwork. In 1925, Albert Blum gifted various art pieces to the Metropolitan Museum of Art that featured an intriguing composition. The particular hanging featured either his Majesty Charles I (or possibly the Duke of Savoy), however the nautch girls present in the hanging are “given much more prominence in the composition than is accord His Royal Highness.”¹⁹⁴ The placement of the nautch girls in a “more prominent” position raises serious questions about cultural superiority and counterflow at a time when the anti-nautch movement was arguably completed.

The appearance of a powerful subaltern group throughout the empire was a nexus around which discussions of morality, feminism and women’s rights, cultural supremacy took place, and led to the nautch girls permeating the imperial system and emanating prodigious counterflow. Certainly the nautch girls deigning to lend their cultural authority and correctness of action to British Imperial figures was a type of counterflow, however the nature of the nautch girls led to even more surreptitious forms of perforation of the imperial framework. These perforations of the imperial framework largely appeared innocuous, however due to the intrinsic superiority of the nautch girls as well as their prodigious soft power, these seemingly small instantiations of counterflow were manifestations of the failure of benevolence and proof of the viability of their cultural relic due to their ability to manifest in the heartland of empire. From an early point then, the nautch girls had successfully moved the interior frontier of culture in the empire.

¹⁹⁴ Frances Morris, “An Indian Hanging,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 20, no. 6 (June 1925): 150.

The number of directly opposing contemporary opinions that attempted to understand the nautch girls was an indicator of their power as well as their structural unfamiliarity in terms of western culture.¹⁹⁵ An author from the 19th century stated that there were “home-grown Nautch girls,” and used them as a comparative function between the two cultures in regard to immorality.¹⁹⁶ The author made a bold attempt at perceived judgment on the basis of morality, but also indicated that even though the anti-nautch movement had started, serious questions of classification, interpretation, and the quality of the nautch girls were still largely unanswered. Moral unity (as well as cultural genealogy) was an integral component of colonial empires as it, “...joined the imagining of European colonial communities and metropolitan national entities in fundamental ways.”¹⁹⁷ The inability to qualify and classify the nautch girls, as well as their superiority, was what was allowing them to move the cultural frontier from the subcontinent back to the metropole. The critical inability of the colonizer to understand their minoritized knowledge formation allowed for the most prodigious form of counterflow: mimicry.

Imitation is power. Imitating a cultural something, and attempting to utilize it in a way that magnifies one's own standing or prowess, yielded significant counterflow and structural power to that cultural something. What was being imitated has power on the imitator as well. It can be viewed as an admission of reverence. Mimicry stood as an anathema to that, “...active consciousness of imperialism, of an aggressive, self-aware imperial mission...”¹⁹⁸ It was the highest and most pervasive form of counterflow and subaltern agency: that the colonizer would

¹⁹⁵ *Structural unfamiliarity* is meant here to describe the fact that the nautch girls, when taken as a whole, have no similar structure (gendered, able to denote correctness, wealth, education, holy) that existed in western culture. The closest female power structure that existed was likely the *Vestal Virgins* of Rome, however even they are woefully inadequate in terms of finding a similar gendered power structure with remotely similar abilities within western culture.

¹⁹⁶ Max O'Rell, “French versus Anglo-Saxon Immorality,” *The North American Review* 159, no. 456 (November 1894): 549.

¹⁹⁷ Cooper and Stoler, 199.

¹⁹⁸ Said, 106.

find the colonized superior, directly challenging the idea of benevolence. Already discussed were a number of operas or ballets featuring the nautch girls, however the number of actual performances featuring white women imitating the nautch girls performance may be significantly higher. In 1869 the *Weekly Times* reported that the, “number of girls and women employed for the purpose must have been astounding,” and that they would not be exaggerating if “the number of females who earn a living in the city by dancing...[were] spoke of them by the thousand.”¹⁹⁹ The source was speaking strictly of London, and that the “pantomimes of the season were furnished with the most superb ballets.”²⁰⁰ The sheer number of women performing in these acts of cultural impression suggests that a large contingent would have to have been white. Some twenty years later, London had not yet quenched its thirst for nautch girls, and “The Nautch Girl” opera premiered that proved a “decided success.”²⁰¹ The longevity and number of nautch or nautch-like performances suggested a cultural fascination and a level of cultural intrigue of a sufficient amount so as to keep the many performers employed. However, sometimes a very public figure exhibiting cultural mimicry is even more important than sheer numbers. Ruth St. Denis (see fig. 4), a primary figure in modern dance as well as a herald for things “eastern”, performed in “The Nautch” in 1910, well into the anti-nautch movement.²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ “The London Nautch,” *Weekly Times* (Melbourne, Vic.) Jun. 4, 1870, 10.

²⁰⁰ “The London Nautch,” 10.

²⁰¹ “The Nautch Girl,” *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney, NSW) Jul. 2, 1891.

²⁰² Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library, “Ruth St. Denis in The Nautch,” New York Public Library Digital Collections.



Figure 4 - Ruth St. Denis²⁰³

²⁰³ Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library, "Ruth St. Denis in The Nautch," New York Public Library Digital Collections.



Figure 5 - Roshanara (Olive Craddock)²⁰⁴

²⁰⁴ Bassano LTD, National Portrait Gallery, "Roshanara," London.

The images of Ruth St. Denis and her contemporary Roshanara imitating the nautch girls and purveying their culture throughout the West, should be contrasted with that of Col. Polier in figure 1. Superiority is a necessary requirement for the justification of the “benevolence” of empire, and cultural imitation of the colonized by the colonizer was an act of cultural subjugation. For Col. Polier, he was imitating a noble elite of the Mughal court, reclining luxuriously and engaging the nautch girls from within the frontier of India. St. Denis and Roshanara, pictured in nautch-like attire and purporting to mimic their dances and entertainment, were a manifestation of the failure of superiority of the empire; a forced intrusion by the colonized. St. Denis and Roshanara represented the interior frontier having been successfully moved out of India and to the metropole. Through the many concerts, operas, and indeed famous imitations, the nautch girls and their counterflow had an obvious impact upon the colonizer and their ideas of superiority through the subjugating act of imitation.

Triumphs of Colonized Culture

“Especially from the late eighteenth century, British officials and educators attempted to convince Indians of the superiority and desirability of British culture and rule...”²⁰⁵ Lord Cornwallis in the late eighteenth century had purposefully prescribed ideas of superiority over the subaltern Indians.²⁰⁶ Centrality of superiority in terms of culture, was intrinsic to the idea of a benevolent empire: superiority must be maintained for the benevolent aspect would cease to lend its qualifying authority and justification to rule. The benevolence of empire and the surety of superiority were only reinforced with the onset of nationalism: “The late nineteenth century is the period that marks the intensification of the imperial domains, territorial redistributions, and

²⁰⁵ Michael H. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain 1600-1857* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2019), 32.

²⁰⁶ Gilmour, 54.

the rise of nationalist movements.”²⁰⁷ Superiority of culture and moral unity provide the base of the cultural pedestal through which benevolence is claimed. It is this imperial knowledge formation that the nautch girls challenge, creating anxiety and questions concerning the moral cohesion and intrinsic superiority of the colonizer.

The idea that the colonized subject could possibly engender multiple qualities that were manifestly and recognizably superior to the colonizer was anathema to the framework of qualification the empire needed to survive. The purposeful disappearing of the colonized culture and supplantation with that of the colonizer culture was an essential function of the benevolent empire. In such a validation and process, the subaltern must always be in the continual “process of disappearing.”²⁰⁸ The anti-nautch movement was precisely the colonized culture removing a class (or caste) that was in the process of appearing throughout the empire and challenging ideas of superiority, be they about gender, morality, or culture. The prodigious qualities of the nautch girls, especially that of the ability to give correctness, acted as a signal fire for questioning the superiority of the empire in public spaces and helped to make them a target for disappearance. Their use as a harmonizing force and the British usurpation of their “correctness” was in itself an act of submission and recognition of the superior. The use of the nautch girls in spaces like advertisements, plays, and operas in the imperial heartland, were triumphs of subalternity and significant problem-events for the colonizer, that culminated in the act of mimicking the colonized. The cultural counterflow of the nautch girls produced ideas of inferiority and provided a mirror for the questioning of the empire’s moral unity. The nautch girls had successfully moved the interior frontier back to Britain. There, their unknown and unrecognizable knowledge formation produced anxiety and counterflow, exposing the paradox of the supposed superiority

²⁰⁷ Anjali Arondekar, “Without a Trace: Sexuality and the Colonial Archive,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, nos. 1&2 (2005): 12..

²⁰⁸ Arondekar, *For the Record*, 56.

of the British empire. In order to save the justification of empire, the intrinsic quality of superiority had to be upheld, and so the colonial rhetoric and education had to be “rescripted” to reinforce the subalternity and otherness of the nautch girl as an act of self preservation.²⁰⁹

“At the margins of Western society, all the non-European regions, whose inhabitants, societies, histories, and beings represented a non-European essence, were made subservient to Europe, which in turn demonstrably continued to control what was not Europe, and represented the non-European in such a way as to sustain control.”²¹⁰ The appearance of the nautch girls in Europe, and the cultural and moral issues they left in their wake, represented a failure of colonial control. British claims to the benevolence of their empire and the parallel notions of superiority, were in danger of being declared null and void by the nautch girls. The nautch girls had forced difficult questions upon the British populace throughout the empire, and provided visible representations of superiority in various respects. In the process of colonization and conquering India, in the qualifying terms of benevolence, “assumed the character of moral obligation.”²¹¹ The empire was therefore morally obliged to supplant the colonized with their own superior colonizer culture; however, the appearance of the nautch girls at interior frontier boundaries and the resultant moral apprehension of the imperial citizen, directly contradicted this maxim.

In the attempt by the British empire to usurp and control the nautch girls, the imperial domain was perforated. The powerful cultural artifact of the nautch girls and their prowess, produced extreme counterflows that could be seen at various levels of cultural strata. That the nautch girls pushed the frontiers and boundaries of the interior lines imperial power formations back to the metropole, says much in terms of their historic reach and gravitas. The questions regarding the supposed superiority of the British empire were brought into open debate by the

²⁰⁹ Arondekar, *For the Record*, 110.

²¹⁰ Said, 106.

²¹¹ Gilmour, 46.

presence of a potent subaltern who, in various aspects, directly challenged the underlying notions of the empire. The qualities of the nautch girls, in terms of their ability to confer correctness or rightness, as well as their education, wealth, rights, and various forms of soft power, overawed British subjects and proved to be a source of intense anxiety. In a show of cultural force and prowess, the nautch girls proved themselves worthy to be mimicked by the colonizer. Their colonized power structure was something wholly alien to the epistemological framework of the British Empire. With their prodigious power they challenged the empire on various societal and cultural frontiers, and moved boundaries that separated colonizers and colonized back to the metropole. The nautch girls thus exposed the inherent paradoxes, internal contradictions, and anxieties of the empire when they were held to be superior to the colonizer. By providing such a powerful juxtaposition and exposure to cultural superiority, the nautch girls were made a target for disappearance by an empire that could not survive having its superiority been held manifestly inferior, especially by its own citizens.

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