

## **Memsahib: Who Are You?**

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Interestingly, American author Ernest Hemingway used the quaint word *memsahib* to refer to the wife of an Englishman in his short story *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* set in Africa in the 1930s. How the word, which originated in colonial India, travelled from the eastern to the western world, its patriarchal and colonial connotations and its subsequent distortion over time are some of things dwelt upon in this article.

Portrayal of female characters in fictional narratives has always intrigued scholars and historians alike. Women, though largely relegated to secondary characters, have drawn attention towards themselves during all important phases in history. Each of these phases shape its own women, with its unmistakable stamp on them, largely defined by men's interests, subordinated and relegated to roles that serve men. Keeping the age-old practice of stereotyping women in mind, we are going to deal with one such word in this article—*memsahib*. The term has not only stereotyped a lot of women but has various meanings for various people.

In one of Ernest Hemingway's popular short stories *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*, the use of the word *memsahib* is thought-provoking. The story revolves around three characters -Francis Macomber, his wife Margaret Macomber and Robert Wilson. The couple is on a big-game hunting safari in Africa with Wilson, who is a professional hunter, as their guide, where Francis's act of cowardice left his wife, who had an upper hand in their marriage, disgusted.

Though the story revolves around courage and ends with the death of the protagonist at the hands of his wife (whether this death was accidental or intentional is best left to the discretion of the readers), it is not the plot but the repetitive use of the term *memsahib* by the Englishman Wilson that tingles the brain cells of a student of history. In this article, we shall try to follow the trajectory of the word and understand its significance in historical terms all the while keeping in mind that an American author uses it for an American lady in a story that is set in the jungles of Africa in the mid-30s of the last century.

### **Origin and History of the Word**

It is well known that memsahib is a combination of the English word *ma'am* (derived from the word madam) and the Arabic word *sahib* (sir). It came into common usage during the British Raj in India to refer to female members of white households and was used to respectfully address a married white woman usually by the non-whites (an unmarried young white girl was generally addressed as *missibaba*). So, whether the word memsahib was just another honorific or it had some other implications, are questions which will be explored in the article.

During the Victorian era, the concept of *pater familias* (male head of a family or household) was firmly entrenched in the British culture. A wife's place in the family was secondary to her husband but was not unimportant; her duties to tend to her husband and properly raise their children were considered as crucial cornerstones of social stability by the Victorians. Men and women inhabited separate spheres—the outside world and the domestic world. This not only ensured the proper functioning of marriage as a unit but also prevented the convergence of the two spheres.

Though a “household general”, the Victorian housewife was a docile, polite, well-dressed lady who was firmly rooted to her home and subordinated her needs to those of her husband and family. The situation changed when they had to accompany their husbands and families to India, where they were a part of the Raj and had leading roles in the imperial pageant. In their closed community, the memsahibs tried to keep Britain alive and raise little empire-builders of the future. However, during their stay in India their outlook began to alter. So, gradually certain changes were witnessed, and slowly the traits of a typical Victorian housewife were replaced with those of the memsahib.

## **The Colonial Memsahib**

By the 1880s, it was widely accepted that the memsahib's domestic role was seen as “domestic administration”, as empire and home became virtually interchangeable terms. The memsahibs were widely encouraged to carry out their civilising missions within the ambit of their compounds, i.e., their bungalows and servant quarters. Colonial writings urged them to adopt the “white woman's burden” of uplifting downtrodden “native” women. They had to be authoritative, relentless, dominative and commanding to do the job of not only supervising the servants (cook, ayahs, wet-nurses, gardeners, cleaners etc.) but also of maintaining a distance with the colonial “other”.

Eventually it was realised that the memsahib was at the top of the family and household hierarchy, their strong persona enabling them to steer the wheel, as permitted by the patriarch. The colonial home was projected as a microcosm of the empire, with the memsahib at the head of a large retinue of household servants, reproducing the power relations characteristic of the imperial regime.

## **Hemingway's Memsahib**

Now, let us look into Hemingway's story. Firstly, it is Wilson, the English guide, who addressed Margaret Macomber as *memsahib* a couple of times and not the native servants; the question of her husband addressing her as such did not arise. Wilson, being an Englishman, must have been acquainted with the word *memsahib* that evolved out of England's association with India; so, it was natural for him to call the wife of a white official *memsahib*, though she was not an English woman.

The reasonable question should be, why not address her as *madam*, *ma'am* or *Mrs. Macomber*? May be this is because *memsahib* was the most common form of addressing the wives of British officials at the time this story was written. Her nature had quite a few traits which bore similarities with a model *memsahib*. Her actions exuded confidence, she was beautiful to look at, was well-mannered, had a commanding and dominative nature and an open mind; she also seemed to be in control of the relationship.

The story ends with the mysterious death of Francis Macomber – did an actual accident kill him? If his death was due to an actual accident, then it, perhaps, occurred at a time when Margaret was indeed looking forward to spend her life as *Mrs. Macomber* – as a secure and happy wife, with her husband wielding the commanding role of a patriarch. Thus situated, she truly became the stereotypical *memsahib*—a loyal, responsible and respectable wife of a highly placed white official.

Yet another possibility is that Francis Macomber was killed by Margaret. If the accident was staged, then what was the reason for her action? Did she kill him because she was apprehensive that he had found his long lost manhood, and that she would not be able to exercise power over him anymore? Did she want to appropriate his property and enjoy the life of an independent woman in full control of herself and her situation? The reader has no way of knowing. But then can she, in such a situation, be called a *memsahib*?

Margaret is depicted as a strong and unscrupulous woman bordering on being cruel. Portrayed mostly in a negative light, her character makes us wonder whether she could really belong to the category of the *memsahib* in the Victorian sense of the term and whether she could ever become "the angel in the house". We have already seen that during the colonial period the *memsahib* became the "other", both in relation to the English *madam* as well as Indian womenfolk. The term became a stereotype. An oversimplified version of the term was often used subconsciously by many along with other terms which labeled women as "nuns", "sluts", "whores" and so on. Maybe the term *memsahib* also fell prey to such casual use, became de-contextualised and somewhere lost its original meaning.

A time would come when the upper classes of Indians would be addressed as *sahibs* and their wives *memsahibs* by people lower down the social scale—evidently a colonial hangover. *Memsahib* is a respectful form of address but without its association with "*sahib*" it is nothing. Thus, it is merely a stereotype created by a patriarchal society, which has caged women for ages. Did these women manage to break the shackles which bound a typical

Victorian housewife when they came to the colony and gained more power as memsahibs? They might have escaped the narrow confinement which the former was subjected to, but turning into the latter did not free them from their cages. They still remained housewives confined to the domestic sphere.

Several such words used in various literary works—and most have been overlooked—intrigue and confuse us. The use of the word memsahib in the story *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* points to the author's familiarity with it. Evidently the word has travelled quite a distance; from India—where it originated—to England and then to the English speaking world of the Americas and then to Africa, where both the story and the word memsahib was contextualised. It signifies an empire-colony relationship of domination and subordination and influences cultural matters in complex ways.

The use of the word memsahib by Hemingway is not casual and should not be considered so either, despite Margaret's unawareness of the term or its insignificance in the story. Our focus is not the characters of the story, but Hemingway and his, if we may say, deliberate use of the term memsahib. As long as Francis Macomber existed, Margaret was the memsahib. Francis's death not only freed him from the dominative clasps of his wife Margaret but also freed her from the bondages of being a memsahib.

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