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"Why do they hate us so much?": Women's Vulnerability and Resistance in Julian Rathbone's *The Mutiny* (2007)

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Neo-Victorianism is concerned with the re-writing of the Victorian past and establishing parallelisms with the present; also, with giving voice to muted discourses. Britain was a huge Empire in the nineteenth century and the Indian Mutiny was one of the most violent episodes in its history. Postcolonial neo-Victorian narratives are a memorial practice that denounces the imperial atrocities long kept silent, Julian Rathbone's *The Mutiny* (2007) being an example. The aim of this article is thus twofold: firstly, to analyse the trope of the Indian Mutiny as a massacre where violence and atrocities were committed on both the Indian and the British side through the critical lens of postcolonial neo-Victorianism and vulnerability studies; and, secondly, to discuss the role of women, both native and English, in the tragedy and its aftermath.

Keywords: women; vulnerability; resistance; neo-Victorian; *The Mutiny*

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"¿Por qué nos odian tanto?" Vulnerabilidad y resistencia femeninas en *The Mutiny* (2007), de Julian Rathbone

El neo-Victorianismo está involucrado en la reescritura del pasado victoriano y en el establecimiento de paralelismos con el presente; también en dar voz a los discursos silenciados. Gran Bretaña era un enorme imperio en el siglo XIX y el Motín Indio fue uno de los episodios más violentos de su historia. Las narrativas postcoloniales neo-victorianas se convierten en una práctica conmemorativa que denuncia las atrocidades imperiales silenciadas durante largo tiempo y *The Mutiny* (2007) de Julian Rathbone es un ejemplo.

El objetivo de este artículo es por tanto doble: primeramente, analizar el tropo del Motín Indio como una masacre donde violencia y atrocidades fueron llevadas a cabo tanto por el lado indio como por el británico, usando el neo-Victorianismo postcolonial y los estudios de vulnerabilidad como lente crítica; en segundo lugar, discutir el papel de las mujeres, tanto nativas como inglesas, en la tragedia y sus consecuencias.

Palabras clave: mujeres; vulnerabilidad, resistencia; neo-Victoriano; *The Mutiny*

1. Introduction

India was known as the jewel in the crown in 19th-century Britain. The Empire had expanded to the point of reaching its zenith during the Victorian period. However, the control exerted by the British and the East India Company over the country was contested, the Great Mutiny of 1857 being one of the most prominent examples. The episodes in the Great Rebellion –as it was also called– attracted the attention of both Victorian and native writers in the second half of the nineteenth century, giving way to a genre known as "mutiny fiction." Today, some writers of historical fiction have taken up the topic and produced novels that retell the story in order to reconstruct the facts and give an unbiased version of the events in a fictional way. This is the case with Julian Rathbone's *The Mutiny*, published in 2007 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the revolt.

The idea of neo-Victorianism in its broadest sense can be seen as a cultural and critical practice that involves not only historical hindsight, but also fantasy, since contemporary "mutiny fiction" texts want to imagine the Victorian age with a view to asserting national identity, to producing restorative justice and to indulging in "escapist exoticism," all three elements being present in Rathbone's novel (Kohlke 2014, 21). The notion of reconstructing the past and giving voice to neglected discourses falls within the aims of neo-Victorian literature, which has recently become global, moving from the local scenario of the British Isles to the global contexts of countries that were previously, or remain, British colonies. This has given way to a "plurality of attitudes, contexts and mindsets from which the long nineteenth century and its neo-Victorian incarnations can be viewed" (Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015, 4). Turning to globalisation as part of our everyday lives, neo-Victorianism may be involved in local, national and international pasts, thereby avoiding a perspective that might be homogeneous or imperialist. As such, it can accommodate various geographical and historical approaches. It is in the study of nineteenth-century traumas that we often find the roots of our current conflicts, and in such situations, neo-Victorian texts can be involved in the process of commemoration and working through, which always carries political implications. In the case of histories concerned with the building of Empire, there are abundant examples of atrocities and clashes of cultures (Kohlke 2008, 7). This is certainly true in *The Mutiny*, where we encounter both Indian and English characters in a colonial setting whose lives and traumas intermingle.

Postcolonialism takes issues of Empire as its main topic of discussion, although contestation is also very much present in the field. Postcolonialism is concerned with a number of aspects like the various areas of the world that can be regarded as postcolonial; the connection between texts produced in former colonies and those produced in Europe and North America; the connection between the text and the theoretical approach. In this sense, postcolonialism is involved in the literary, theoretical and political fields with a diversity of personal, racial, cultural and national stances, which means that openness must be its main feature (Punter 2000, 58-10). Thus, taking postcolonialism as a point of departure, postcolonial neo-Victorianism becomes a sub-genre in the remembering and re-writing of the Victorian past (Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015, 7-9). The Victorian Empire was made through a series of networks concerned with trade, economic exchange and cultural and religious influences, all of which contributed to Britain's global power. These networks have resulted in acts of remembrance of Empire in neo-Victorian fiction that form the basis of contemporary ways of cultural and social thinking and where memory is an important tool (Llewellyn and Heilmann 2013, 28, 35).

Memory plays a crucial role in historical fictions, and the positioning of neo-Victorian texts as acts of memory allows the reader to make the effort of historical recollection, becoming aware of its consequences for the present. Memory and nostalgia are interconnected in the sense that nostalgia can be for the reader a means of critical historical enquiry, invoking affect towards the act of remembering, as happens in neo-Victorian texts. Nostalgia becomes a tool that recreates the past and defines contemporary identities, but most importantly, one which represents a subversive position which questions traditional histories and official historiographies, giving way to other interpretations of the past (Mitchell 2010, 4-6). In this sense, in neo-Victorianism the political and the ethical are entwined so that public memory and its transmission become its aim with texts acting as sites of memory. Alternative sources of history and of traces from the past "[generate] different kinds of conceptual archives, be they fictional or factual, to act as conduit of and to the nineteenth century past for current and future generations" (Kohlke 2008, 13). In this sense, *The Mutiny* tries to reconcile both the Indian and the English side of the conflict and provide the reader with other views on the facts about and the consequences of colonial violence.

A politics of reconciliation, that is, the recognition of the injustices of colonialism and apologising for the excesses of colonial power, becomes necessary in order to forgive and forget a colonial past full of violence. However, some postcolonial traumas can only be experienced through a knowledge of history as they happened very far away in time for the contemporary mind. At the same time, it is important to put an end to the central position of Europe in the historical narrative, so that subaltern histories that have fallen into oblivion can be recovered (Peter 2019, 154-156). Following Edward Said's ideas, a rhetoric of blame should, however, be avoided in the postcolonial analysis of colonial traumas. (1994, 18) Nevertheless, while it is necessary to condemn British

violence against Indians, the need to show some sympathy for the British in contexts of colonial retaliation and resistance should be considered (Peter 2019, 170), as happens in *The Mutiny*.

Issues of trauma and vulnerability need to be analysed through the prism of postcolonialism in order to offer reparation to victims of the massacres of the Indian Mutiny on both sides of the conflict, who on many occasions showed their capacity for agency and resistance in the midst of the tragedy. This was especially the case for many women, both English and native, who, fulfilling their expected gender roles in their respective cultures, played a prominent part in the outcome of the confrontations. When Judith Butler first theorised the notion of vulnerability in her seminal work *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), she insisted on the importance that the representation of vulnerable alterity has in constituting the basis of mutual humanity beyond the enforcement of exclusionary policies and ideologies. However, in rethinking vulnerability and resistance together, Butler later claims that vulnerability is not ontological but politically imposed and unequally distributed. Those who are more vulnerable oppose this condition of vulnerability first by recognising it, and then through performative bodily acts of resistance (2016, 13-27).

Therefore, the aim of this article is twofold: firstly, to analyse the trope of the Indian Mutiny in Rathbone's novel as a massacre where violence and atrocities were committed on both the Indian and the British side using postcolonial neo-Victorianism as the critical lens; and, secondly, to discuss the role of the women, both native and English, in the tragedy and in their own cultures, as examples of vulnerability and resistance. Also, their agencies as wives and mothers and the ways in which they exerted their own sexualities will be discussed, and the conclusion reached is that their participation in the events was of great relevance but has hitherto not been properly acknowledged either in the discourse of history or that of "mutiny fiction." The Indian Mutiny is here demonstrated to be a conflict that can be analysed from a gender perspective, and where women determined the course of events to an important degree.

2. Re-writing History: The Great Rebellion, Violence and "Mutiny Fiction"

The British Indian Empire covered the territories of what today are India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma. What was known as the Indian army was in fact the army of three Presidencies, Bengal, which had its capital in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. Another important province was the Punjab, and there were several states governed by Indian rulers like Hyderabad, Kashmir and Mysore. There were a huge number of minor languages, but the most important ones totalled fifteen. At the time of the Mutiny, the Indian Empire was ruled by the East India Company, which was a Charter company established in 1600 that had the monopoly on trade in the eastern region. By the end of the Seven Years War in 1763, the Company was the dominant power on the Indian subcontinent, with the help of the British Navy and Army. With the

renewal of the Charter in 1813, the Company lost all trading rights in India, but still ruled the country. Later, in 1835, the Company changed its official language from Persian to English (Knight 2012, 1-4). In the novel, Rathbone criticises the East India Company and its management of the colony in the following words: "[T]he Company is benevolent, or believes itself to be. And it is from Leadenhall Street in London that its senior functionaries run the Indian Empire, the enterprise, and most of them have been no nearer India than Dover Beach" (2007, 41).

We must look for the causes of the 1857 Great Rebellion in a religious conflict which brought about a clash of cultures and civilisations. In the eyes of the Indians, the British did not respect their religious traditions and values. This confrontation had its antecedents in the discontent of the peasant and tribal populations together with that of the feudal classes which had been dispossessed as the result of British imperialist expansion and the increasing power of the East India Company. The rebellion ended with the Crown taking the rule of India from the hands of the East India Company in 1858 with the Royal Proclamation and the subsequent passing of the Government of India Acts in the same year (Blunt 2000, 422). The Indian Mutiny was, therefore, a defence of patriotism on the part of the Indians and a bid for independence from British rule that became, *de facto*, a racial war. In this state of events, it was the sepoys –eighty-five Indian soldiers in British service– that started the rebellion because of their religious qualms about the use of Enfield rifles, introduced in 1857 (Pati 2010, 1-4, 9-10; Randall 2003, 8). According to Biswamoy Pati, "the Bullets were coated with grease made from the fat of cows (sacred to Hindus) and the pigs (abhorred by the Hindus). As the cartridges had to be bitten before being used, the Hindu and Muslim sepoys interpreted it as part of a plot to convert them to Christianity, by defiling their caste and their religion" (2010, 1). Obviously, this was in fact just an indicator of a wider unrest, as Governor Canning states in the novel: "[…] the cartridges are a symptom only. They believe, they really believe we intend to force Christianity on them, one way or another" (Rathbone 2007, 184).

Therefore, it was discontent and disaffection that provoked the rising of the Indian Infantry soldiers. In May, detachments of the Bengal army rebelled in Meerut and killed British officers as well as setting fire to the cantonment, after which they marched to Delhi and declared the Mughal king, Bahadur Sha II, the ruler of India. Throughout the year, several revolts against the British happened, spreading through central and northern India, with acts in Delhi, Lucknow and Cawnpore being of special significance. These revolts mainly happened in the Bengal army, but not in the other two East India Company armies under the presidencies of Madras and Bombay. Nonetheless, both military and popular revolts also took place in a disparate and localised manner (Blunt 2000, 404). This is what *The Mutiny* reflects: "Cases of insubordination, if not mutiny multiplied. Buildings were burnt, including some in the railhead on the bank of the Ganges opposite Calcutta" (Rathbone 2007, 119). Thus, the Mutiny not only involved discontented sepoy soldiers, but also peasants that had been financially drained by

taxes and members of the Indian royalty that had been disinherited like the Rani of Jhansi and Nana Sahib (Erll 2006, 164). In June the mutineers reached Cawnpore and declared Nana Sahib the Peshwa –leader– of the revolt; the British, under the command of General Wheeler, were under siege for five weeks and then surrendered, with the guarantee of their safe passage to Allahabad. However, when on 27 June the British soldiers together with their women and children were on the steps of Sati Chaura Ghat, on the point of embarking transport to safety along the river Ganges, more than 300 men were killed by the rebels. The 210 women and children who survived were kept prisoners in Suvadha Kothi and then taken to a nearby dwelling known as *bibigha* -- the residence of an officer's mistress or *bibi* -- until 15 July 1857. It was then, when the approach of British troops under the control of General Havelock meant the rebels' defeat was imminent, that they massacred these women and children and buried their bodies in a well in the compound (Singh 2010, 98). Two hundred and eighty-three kilometres south in Lucknow, the British population was kept under siege in the residency compound between June and November 1857. There were 240 women, of whom sixty-nine were married to either soldiers or officers of the British army. Forces from Britain under the command of Sir Colin Campbell liberated the injured and the women and children, who were then evacuated. Nonetheless, the city was not recaptured until March 1858 after much fighting (Blunt 2000, 417-418). After the city was retaken, 35,000 British soldiers were sent to India in June 1858 to brutally repress the uprising (Blunt 2000, 404).

At the time, the mutiny was seen by many British people as proof of India's barbarism, primitivism and lack of law. It was considered India's First War of Independence and precipitated a huge crisis for Britain, which considered that the civilising mission of bringing peace and progress to other races all over the globe was at stake. The Mutiny can be also seen as the point of departure for a national British identity crisis with its loss of power over the colonies all over the world at the time of decolonisation, and later in contemporary constructions of nationhood and national values. This relates to the current new role of other world powers and the growing importance of the European Union in international politics, the latter being one of the reasons for Brexit (Kohlke 2010, 368, 371). This feeling of identity crisis is notably expressed by one British character in *The Mutiny* talking about progress brought to India by British colonisation when he states: "Got things moving in all sorts of ways. Roads and canals, river transport, steamers and so forth, and we've made a good start on the railways. The telegraph and the postal system" (Rathbone 2007, 93).

People in the early- and mid-Victorian periods were not ignorant of the process of Empire, and it had a considerable influence on domestic issues and reform movements in London; however, imperialist ideology seriously began after the Second Reform Bill was passed in Britain in 1867, giving the vote to small landowners and tenants as well as to householders and lodgers who paid rent of £10 a year or more. It was then that jingoism began to be part of British mentality. This proclaimed the belief in the racial

superiority of Europeans and of the English as a nation, who had the responsibility to bring civilisation to other parts of the world that were still in an age of darkness. As such, the Indian Mutiny represented a turning point for imperialist ideology (Bratlinger 1988, 4, 8).

However, Rathbone critiques civilisation and British superiority in the novel when he writes a digression of John Stuart Mill's belief that English rule was beneficial to the peoples of South Asia:

> It ignored the racism of the occupiers [...] and the ruthless not to say patronising way in which the reforms had been implemented; it took no account of arrogance, summary trials and confiscations, of harsh punishment and inadequate rewards. It did not comprehend the abyssal divide between the opposed cultures. Above all, it ignored the invasive intrusion perpetrated on a people who in some cases had been conquered and in others bought and sold, the intrusion into their religious lives. (2007, 166)

Consequently, violence was the response to violence on both sides of the conflict, as will be discussed later.

With the creation of the "myth of the mutiny," narratives of the event contributed to the legitimisation of British rule over India. They told a story that was not always accurate but was not questioned by British society. In this narration of the conflict, "themes of Indian treachery, of terrible Indian atrocities, and –as far as the British side is concerned– of extreme heroism" (Erll 2006, 164) figured prominently. In this sense, Erll continues, from the colonisers' point of view, "Indians had betrayed British benevolence by turning against their just, liberal and progressive rulers" (164). After the revolt, many diaries and memoirs were written as testimonies of lived experience; they were a way of literary remembering through a first-person narrative that addressed the reader in an intimate form. Although they were not really fictional writing, these memoirs planted the seed for proper mutiny novels which produced and conveyed "representations of the past as lived-through experience and as an object of commemorative memory" (Erll, 2006, 166-167). Indeed, the genre of the "mutiny novel" flourished from the 1860s onwards, reaching its peak at the same time as that of high imperialism in the 1890s. Many texts of this kind, which were pseudo-historical fictions, were published and had a readership in both colonial India and Britain. They projected the confrontations between colonisers and natives, who were described as hostile along racial lines, with Indians being represented as "the other," as cruel, lascivious and treacherous, and thus myths about race and sexuality were perpetuated (Sen 2010, 111). Similarly, sermons and the press in Britain produced almost the same versions, connected with racial hysteria and sensationalism, in their descriptions of the Mutiny (Randall 2003, 9). In contrast, the British were represented as villains in India's cultural imagination and continue to be described as such in contemporary Indian literature and film (Peter 2019, 158).

Some examples of "mutiny novels" that became popular romances and juvenile novels include G.A. Henty's *In Times of Peril* (1881) and *Rujub the Juggler* (1893), H.C. Irwin's *A Man of Honour* (1896), J.E. Muddock's *The Great White Hand* (1896) and Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters* (1897). Other popular examples are Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) -- a novel that represents an indirect mode of remembering --, and later E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) -- which conveys a reflexive mode of memory. Another outstanding example of a "mutiny novel" is J.G. Farrells's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), which is involved in a demythologising mode deconstructing all the literary topoi of "mutiny" writing. More recently, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) gives not only a revisionist version of the Mutiny, but also a version of the Asian diasporic Mutiny memory in contemporary Britain (Erll 2006, 177).

In the case of Rathbone's *The Mutiny* (2007), a new version of the conflict is given. Postcolonial neo-Victorianism brings the possibility of gaining access to a repository of English heritage at a global level that is concerned with the consequences of colonial expansion, imperial policies and the acknowledgement of colonial atrocities. However, while revisionism is part of the neo-Victorian agenda, the texts sometimes offer a regressive perspective which is not always contestatory. On the contrary, they sometimes celebrate the British colonial past, but in all cases they represent a traumatic recall in their expression of colonial hauntings. The genre allows both writers and readers to find traces of imperialism in current policies like multiculturalism; such policies try to put an end to the notion of "the other" and to racism, but, at the same time, remind us of a racialised past. Neo-Victorian postcolonial fictions are, then, memory texts that encompass melancholia, nostalgia and trauma as indicators of collective disease in contemporary societies. Postcolonial theory can be understood as memorial practice and as a way of making history accountable for the present (Ho 2012, 11-17).

In her analysis of *The Mutiny,* Marie-Luise Kohlke defines the "mutiny trope" as one that "provides a nexus linking past and present traumas and ways of dealing with their long-term after-effects" (2010, 371). She refers to the Mutiny as an excessively violent event that allows the analysis of national processes involved in mourning, commemoration and forgetting. Kohlke also sees violence as a form of "communal commemoration," but each side involved in the conflict tries to occupy all the space available for their claim to victimhood. It is necessary to give the oppressed access to public discourse, to include the trauma of the imperialists as well as that of the colonised peoples (2010, 372-377). This idea is something that Rathbone wants to convey in his novel when he states: "In truth, and it is bootless for either side to disagree, both sides in the Mutiny behaved appallingly. The scars, the anger and the guilt remain to this day and vitiate all but the novelist's attempts to portray the truth" (2007, 347). However, Kohlke argues that *The Mutiny* describes the trauma of the British in more detail than that of the Indians. She thinks that the author justifies and presents British violence as understandable after the Indian massacres,

attributing it to a state of transient madness (Kohlke 2010, 388, 390). However, my contention is that Rathbone tries to convey the idea that violence was on both sides and so a politics of reconciliation and restoration is possible.

Indian violence is presented in the novel as sadistic and full of gore, as in the killing of Charlotte Chambers, the wife of one of the British officers:

> Seeing a hand clutching a corner of the cotton bundle on the verandah, he threw the cleaver on the bed, stooped over her, searched in the folds for her arm and dragged her out of the muslin curtaining. She began to scream. From behind he wound her hair round his left hand and pinned her hair to the floor, drew the knife and neatly, just as he did with pigs, slit her throat, opening the jugular vein. He held her down as the blood spurted, then gushed out, over the decking until the thrashing of her limbs faded to a last nervous twitching; then he tore open her nightdress from her neck to her knees and, again almost using surgical skill, dissected out of her womb the still living foetus of a tiny girl, cut the umbilical chord and placed the baby on its dead mother's breast. (Rathbone 2007, 152-153)

The killer is likened to a butcher in this passage, that seeming to be his profession. His deeds are presented as abominable as there is nothing more cruel, unmanly and inhumane than the murder of a pregnant woman. British violence is described in more lenient ways, as in the following example: "Back in the lines and round the maidan the hangings began. There was not enough rope, not enough animals from which the victims could be launched to a relatively quick death by breaking or dislocating their necks" (Rathbone 2007, 215).

The British revenge for the Indian killings is presented as more merciful and less furious, conveying the idea that it was utter desperation in the face of the massacres of women and children at the hands of bloodthirsty Indians that led the civilised God-abiding colonisers to repress the rebellion so violently. Simultaneously, the British are presented as capable of remorse and repentance, as when the lawyer Tom Harding commits suicide after executing the same natives who had previously saved his life, or when Lieutenant Farquar condemns the unnecessary murders. In this way, then, narratives of trauma, which have proliferated in the twentieth- and twenty-first century as a means for the re-enactment of violent episodes in the history of humanity, allow for cultural critique, although British violence is present anyway.

Kohlke makes a thorough analysis of the novel and introduces the notion of the "mutiny trope" as a tool to describe issues of trauma and violence in the Indian Mutiny with the aim of revising a colonial past that requires reparation. Although she depicts and discusses violence against women in the text, I think that she pays little attention to the role played both by Indian and British female characters in this account of the conflict or to the importance of gender vulnerability and resistance together with agency during the events. And to that I devote my following section.

3. British and Indian Women Becoming Resilient: From Vulnerability to Resistance

In what follows, the analysis will be focused on the role of women —both British and native— in the conflict and on how Rathbone's "mutiny fiction" presents gender and sexuality as decisive factors during the revolt. As I will argue, the novel tries to find a balance between the dependant position traditionally attributed to women, both sexually and in the public sphere, and their essential involvement in political and military issues with nationalistic connotations. This moves them from a position of vulnerability to one of resistance, following Butler's predicament.

In colonial discourse, British women were defined as creatures to be protected, cherished and admired, and as such, the female gender and the nation were conflated in the mythology of Empire (Sen 2010, 111). Behind this ideology was the middle-class, which saw itself as playing the principal role in the creation of the nation. In this context, the idealised British woman was differentiated from the native woman, who was seen as vulgar, coarse and promiscuous (Singh 2010, 95-96). However, in my opinion, the novel makes an attempt at disrupting these images of British and Indian women, who were on many occasions the protagonists of the events.

"Mutiny fiction" has traditionally tried to represent the severity of the Mutiny through its embodiment of the fate of British women during the uprising, namely the defilement of their bodies and homes. In this way, military and domestic discourses have been linked through the representation of women in the colonies as wives, sisters, daughters and, above all, mothers (Blunt 2000, 403-404). This is true in the case of the British female characters in *The Mutiny*. One of these women is Sophie Hardcastle, who is married to a British officer, Captain Tom Hardcastle and moves to India where she has her first child Stephen. Although she is described as a fragile innocent young woman, she shows great courage and determination from the very moment she sets foot in the colony, inspired by Britain's "civilising mission":

> Here she was, thousands of miles away, surrounded by an alien people, contributing just a little to the history that had brought this rightness, this news, this perfection of understanding, this civilisation and love of God to a benighted land, torn with religious dissension as it had been, chaotic, anarchic. It was a noble calling, a noble company she was part of. (Rathbone 2007, 20)

Although she represents the purity of the British woman and she only has sex with her husband for the purpose of procreation, she discovers sexual passion in the figure of another man, Bruce Farquhar, whom she had met when she was still more or less a child back in England. She had never felt passion for her husband in four years of marriage but, contradicting Victorian ideas about the lack of sexual impulse in women, she takes the initiative when she sees Farquhar again by chance in India after having first met him in England where he tried to get amorous with her: "This time it was she who

moved closer so almost perforce he had to release her hands and fold her into a closer embrace with her cheek against his shoulder. [...] She had never been kissed in this way. She had never before felt such a surge of physical longing" (Rathbone, 2007 108).

However, British women in India not only show determination and agency in sexual matters as this passage demonstrates, but they also show great courage in the face of adversity and extreme violence. This is what Rathbone describes as happening when the British women and children who survived the Ghat massacre after the Cawnpore siege were taken to the *bibighar*. However, the women were not victim to rape as the British press of the time asserted (Randall 2003, 6), and Rathbone makes readers focus their attention on the brave behaviour of British females in the face of utter annihilation:

> Forceful characters –and there have been perhaps few of our species so forceful as a British middle-aged or elderly upper-middle-class lady used to be– would have emerged and asserted themselves. Once some recovery had been made from the shock at what had happened at the ghat, women who had managed substantial households of extended family and many servants, and, moreover, had survived the Wheeler's Entrenchment[1], would have insisted on some order and regulation. (Rathbone 2007, 308)

This passage supports the idea of women's agency in the context of a Victorian mindframe, since their role as carers and managers of households and families is highlighted. The issue of the gendering of agency has always been controversial since it usually suits the values of the market economy. Agency is associated with individualism, self-sufficiency, voluntarism and free action, attributes that can be found in women, but, the idea of exerting agency through sympathy has become a feature only in the case of females (Evans 2013, 49, 51). Thus, in real life, we find a patriarchal notion of women's agency which is not a single straightforward attribute but is "always mediated by values and practices of the particular community" (Evans 2013, 56). Rathbone tries to convey the role of English women in a positive light in his neo-Victorian "mutiny fiction," but despite their resistance, they are killed by Indian rebels in a savage way:

> It was a battle and its logic was that of a battle. When the sepoys had tried to drag them out the women were defending a narrow doorway and their children were not under immediate threat. But once these new and far more committed arrivals had carved their way into the room each woman's first concern became her children. [...] [T]hey were there to kill, nothing else, and they cut them down, severing heads and limbs, gashing torsos, necks,

[1] The Entrenchment was built outside the city of Cawnpore by General Sir Hugh Wheeler when news of the mutiny in Meerut reached the city. It was a fortified position, based around two barracks to be used as a refuge for the European community. When the Siege of Cawnpore began in early June 1857 all the Europeans made for the entrenchment, but the enclosing wall was not yet finished. The Siege lasted just over three weeks, but the sun was at its hottest. The Entrenchment had almost no shade and only one well, so it did not serve well for its purposes, being destroyed by enemy fire. ("General Wheeler's entrenchment at Cawnpore, March 1858").

> shoulders, breasts and waists with great sweeps of their heavy curved swords. The amount of blood was appalling, spouting, gushing, pouring over everybody, everything. The noise too was hellish. (Rathbone 2007, 315)

This fragment shows two relevant aspects of "mutiny fiction": on the one hand, it emphasises the role of women as mothers when the protection of their children comes first, even risking their own lives; on the other, the cruelty of the Indian mutineers, "the new arrivals," is emphasised and therefore is used to justify in a way the violence with which the British army in India suffocated the rebellion, killing and executing men, women and children showing no pity or compassion (Blunt 2000, 408).

As to the role of Indian women in the Mutiny, there are several representations of the "loyal Indian woman" in "mutiny fiction," some of which are present in Rathbone's text. These women supported their own people, but also the British during the Great Rebellion. Among such characters in fiction are the royal courtesan and the dancing girl, the faithful native concubine or wife of the English hero, the devoted ayah and the Indian woman who has a female friendship with a white woman. However, in British literary representations and historical accounts of the Mutiny, Indian women are described as "intriguing, promiscuous" and "cruel organisers of massacres of English women and children" (Sen 2010, 112). At the same time, native women were at the centre of the British colonising agenda to save them from abusive patriarchal practices in India. For example, *sati* – the practice of Indian widows being burnt alive with their husbands on their death pyres -- was prohibited in 1829, and widows were allowed to marry again after legislation was passed in 1856. But the native woman was also seen as a symbol of the imperial domain of the land, which had to be subjugated and colonised by the British; in other words, Indian women had the attraction of the exotic and of (sexual) conquest that far away territories also held (Sen 2010, 113). This reflects Said's notion of Orientalism, which he defined as "a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient" (1979, 95). However, in current feminist theory, this projection is interspersed with forms of domination based on ideas of gender, class and race, which in turn are interconnected with discourses of political reform (Brantlinger 1988, 10-11).

Turning our attention first to the dancing girl and the courtesan, they represented subversive figures who enjoyed more agency and freedom in sexual matters than the Victorian wife. Courtesans and dancing girls had an important role in the Indian Mutiny in places such as Meerut, Lucknow and Cawnpore, where they supported the rebels and offered the use of their salons for their meetings. From the eighteenth century till the middle of the nineteenth century, the dancing girl, or *nautch* girl, was a protagonist in the social life of the British men and women when they went to the homes of rich Indians and the dancers performed for them accompanied by music (Sen 2010, 114). Rathbone refers to them as "the erotic dancers the regiments occasionally entertained themselves with" (2007, 27).

Courtesans, or *tawaifs*, were well-educated women who enjoyed patronage, wealth, respectability and social standing but, after the Great Rebellion, they became associated with prostitution and anti-British political movements (Sen, 2010: 115). Courtesans had a talent for music and dancing and were professionals and businesswomen who owned property and paid taxes. Chief courtesans oversaw the running of their establishments (*kothas*); they recruited and trained women to work in their households. They could have mobility because they did not depend on men. Some of them became spies in order to have access to the enemy's secrets or to establish political liaisons; others were presented as pleasure toys for powerful men. Despite this, their *kothas* later became equated with brothels, and courtesans became regulated like prostitutes with the passing of the Indian Contagious Diseases Act of 1864, that is, Act XXII in India (Singh 2010, 103-107).

One example of a courtesan was Azeezun, who had a close relationship with the sepoy Shamsuddin Khan of the 2nd Cavalry who was very active in the 1857 Rebellion. Azeezun was an informer and messenger, forming a group of women who helped the men in arms. She was at the service of the Nana Sahib and his second-in-command Azimullah Khan. It is believed that she had a notable role in the killing of the British women and children in the *bibighar*, but it was another courtesan with a lower position in the hierarchy and one of the slaves at Nana Sahib's palace, Hossaini –known as the Begum–, who seems to have ordered the massacre. Other examples are Begum Samru and Begum Hazrat Mahal. The former had a prominent role in the political struggles of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India; the latter was Avadh Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's wife and under her leadership the rebels were successful in the seizure of Lucknow. She even agreed to crown her son and make herself regent (Singh 2010, 100-101, 105-106). Rathbone relates these events:

> Her. Old Wajid has had several wives none of whom seems to have been able to produce an heir but then along came a lady, a courtesan, called Hazrat who claims her son, now ten years old, called Birjis Qadr, is Wajid's son too. He believes her, well, I suppose he wanted to, and made her the boss wife, the Begum, and gave her the title Mahal. Now the main factions in Lucknow are apparently looking to persuade her to claim the throne for her son and act as regent. (2007, 95)

It is clear that these women wielded great power and played a crucial part in the Great Rebellion. But other Indian women, too, had a conspicuous role in the relationship between the natives and the British during the colonial period, as some mixed-race marriages happened. This was quite a common practice between Company officers and elite Muslim women in the first part of the nineteenth century. Later, British officials continued having "native" mistresses or concubines that they kept secret, especially in distant areas. Beautiful Indian women had always been considered as a sexual attraction and were described as "black velvet." Indian wives were described as

modest, patient, faithful and devoted to their husbands. They captured the Western imagination, leading to the notion of the "faithful Hindu wife" (Sen 2010, 117). This is the case with Charles Blackstock, who felt a fascination for an Indian woman who was the cousin of the Ranee of Aligarth. After he married her, she had a daughter by him, Uma Blackstock, who has a prominent role in the plot of *The Mutiny*, where she stands for native sensuality. Thus, in the narrative, we learn that: "The fact of it is that Native women are taught to be submissive and biddable everywhere except in the bedroom" as "[t]here they have the reputation of possessing skills modesty must leave to your imagination. The combination is apparently irresistible" (Rathbone 2007, 12).

The Ranee of Jhansi, also involved in the insurgency, also represents the sensuality attributed to the native woman. She embodies exoticism in her sexual encounter with Bruce Farquar:

> In what seemed like a dream, a female figure folded back the fine cotton sheet, embroidered with the likeness of lilies and other flowers, and knelt with her knees on either side of his waist. She was naked apart from rings on her fingers, a jewelled bangle and pearls twined into her black hair. She was perfumed with civet and other, sweeter, odours. Her skin was dark and at first cool, but as her passion grew, became moist. Her movements, her advances and retreats, her final offering of the gift she so urgently wanted to bestow were conducted with a strange mixture of confidence and assertiveness for much of the time, but occasionally with hesitancy and even clumsiness. (Rathbone 2007, 225)

This extract reveals all aspects traditionally associated with Indian women's sexuality in the Western mind: exotic smells, dark skin and a sexual drive combining passion with modesty and even shyness that allured white men. Uma was one of the Ranee's faithful followers and supporters in the uprising in Jhansi, working as a spy. She encounters Farquar when he leaves his regiment due to his feelings of guilt and they become lovers. Farquar dies of a burst appendix while Uma is fighting for the Ranee, who loses the city to the British soldiers. Both women show great agency and determination, although both die in the end in the clamour of battle. Their bodies were cremated following the Indian tradition and, on the site, "[t]here is today a large and handsome equestrian statue of her [the Ranee] close to the spot where she and Uma were burnt" (Rathbone 2007, 427).

There is, though, still one more female figure who is quite common in "mutiny fiction": the *ayah*. She was a faithful Indian woman who was in the service of a *memsahib*, that is, a white upper-class woman. The *ayah* had a very important role in looking after of children of British families living in India. The relationship between the *memsahib* and the *ayah* was based on hierarchies of race and class, and domestic structures of power in the private sphere (Sen 2010, 119). In Rathbone's fiction, the Hardcastle family's *ayah* is called Lavanya and she, not only looked after the Hardcastle baby, Stephen, but also breastfed him with the milk she had for her son Deepa. Rathbone

describes her feelings becoming a servant in this British household: "And of course that world, the one she had been bought into, her own milk included, was at first utterly alien. [...] [M]ost of her life was spent on her own, with little Deepa and Stephen. And with them she had formed a deep and personal bond" (Rathbone 2007, 156).

In Lavanya, we find an example of an ordinary Indian woman's sexuality where Rathbone uses delicate terms to describe a natural act between Lavanya and her new partner after she escapes Meerut that is free from all the constrictions and contained behaviour of sexual intercourse between British couples: "Presently they took off their scant clothing and made love as Lavanya had known they would. She was happy to, and at the worst she knew it would be better than rape. [...] [U]ntrammelled by the hang-ups that afflicted the white race, both male and female, she was pleased" (Rathbone 2007, 270).

Despite her servitude, Lavanya plays an essential part when the Mutiny breaks out and she escapes Meerut with the Hardcastles' child and those of their family friends the Dixons. Many white children who were lost or orphaned during the Great Rebellion were saved by their *ayahs*. This fact is closely connected with the trope of "inter-racial female friendships" in "mutiny fiction." These relationships did not exist from the 1850s onwards, except during the Great Rebellion. While there are no examples of such inter-racial female friendships in *The Mutiny*, the brave attitude of many British women in the face of adversity, in many instances with the help of their Indian counterparts, is worthy of note here. Many British women and children cross-dressed to survive the Mutiny and hid in Indian houses mostly belonging to their servants; they also fled to the countryside, but in all cases they and their Indian women friends showed great courage in resistance and agency, despite their situations of vulnerability (Sen 2010, 121-122, 124).

4. Conclusion: Neo-Victorian Restoration

To conclude, throughout this article I have shown that "mutiny fiction" is a trope that we can certainly find in Rathbone's neo-Victorian fiction. *The Mutiny* can be analysed as an example of trauma fiction that presents the violence on both the British and the Indian side, with the aim of giving reparation and restoration to the victims. However, the British massacres are presented in a more lenient way and are to a certain extent justified by the bloodthirsty and savage aggression towards British women by Indian soldiers during the various assaults. The postcolonial approach and the use of historical recollection provides the reader with a stance from which to assess the horrible consequences of British colonialism under the umbrella of the "civilising mission." Memory should bring compensation, but this does not always happen, especially when oppressed populations under colonial rule are situated in a similar position to that of the oppressors.

However, I have also demonstrated that the role of women in "mutiny fiction" has been neglected in the analysis of texts like Rathbone's novel. In my reading,

they become the protagonists of the narrative of the events in many instances. We have found examples of brave British women that show their courage under extreme conditions, facing the enemy and protecting their children. Also, in the case of Indian women, we find characters that represent the tropes of the courtesan, the dancing girl and the *ayah*, showing different loyalties and playing crucial roles during the Great Rebellion. In all cases, native and white women display agency and resistance, despite being in situations of extreme vulnerability in Butlerian terms. Their sexuality is also re-interpreted in this article, with Indian women showing a sexual behaviour that is not always associated with "the exotic" and with Said's Orientalism, but sometimes with a natural act where women can enjoy the pleasures of sex on equal terms with men. Simultaneously, white women's sexuality is presented under a light different from the notions of purity and modesty that were expected from them according to the Victorian mentality.

All in all, this historical fiction tries to rewrite the history of the Indian Mutiny by bringing a new contemporary perspective to the events and the role of colonisers and colonised peoples in this violent episode in order for the gaps in the archives to be filled and extrapolated to situations of postcolonialism by the contemporary reader.[2]

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