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## **Social Standards of Imposition: Respectability and the Raj through the Eyes of Governess Marjorie Ussher**

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Social Standards of Imposition:

Respectability and the Raj through the Eyes of Governess Marjorie Ussher

Erin A. Nelsen

St. Catherine University Honors Thesis

March 22, 2020

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### **Abstract**

The British Empire possesses a long history of imposing ways of thinking, political structures, economic structures, and social standards on their territories. From 1934 to 1940, during the final years of the Raj (British sovereignty in India), this imperialism extended to standards of beauty and respectability in Hyderabad, the capital of the Hyderabad state. These standards arise in the archived letters British governess Marjorie Ussher wrote to her family during this timeframe. Through a close reading of the letters, this thesis recognizes and reflects on Ussher's aesthetics depictions of the people, objects, and the natural landscape around her. Within this context, the research analyzes the letters for the themes of race, gender, and apparel. This first-hand account, through the eyes of Ussher, offers a unique glimpse into how culturally conditioned aesthetic judgments impact assessments of beauty and respectability in the British Raj context. Through this thesis, it is evident that Ussher acts in line with white British social standards of what it meant to be a likable, attractive, and well-mannered woman in the 20th century British Empire despite her separation from the metropole. By doing so, Ussher presents herself as a respectable British woman to her social circle and family back in Ireland. As a common person without a specific motivation to promote the empire, Ussher's understanding and promotion of the imperial message provides a unique perspective on how deeply British social standards permeated into citizens' everyday lives.

*Keywords:* Social Standards, Race, Apparel, Gender, Identity, India, British Empire, Colonialism, Raj

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## Introduction and Background

“I was very sad leaving Mrs. Mae. She is one of the most splendid people I know & seems to combine many virtues & qualities, very good looking – well dressed (in fact extremely so) very witty, clever & well read & the kindest most thoughtful person one could ever meet. She does the most beautiful needlework too.”<sup>1</sup>

Marjorie Ussher, 1938

On a short trip to Bareilly, India, Marjorie Ussher, a white British governess in British India, reflects on her disappointment at leaving Mrs. Mae in a letter to her mother. Presumably, Mrs. Mae is another white British woman accompanying her husband in British India. Since Mae is a common English name, the ‘Mrs.’ implies her marital status, and analysis shows that Ussher spends the majority of her work breaks surrounded by other European persons. While one could easily interpret this sentiment merely as feelings of sadness over separation from a close friend, the statement carries with it implications on concepts of respectability and beauty in the context of 20th century British India.

This thesis will further dive into why and how Ussher demonstrates these qualities and uses them to her advantage throughout her letters. For example, in this quotation, Ussher praises Mrs. Mae’s appearance, personality, manner, apparel, and performance of feminine duties, all of which likely rest on her internal feelings surrounding race and class. Ussher’s reflection on Mrs. Mae calls to attention questions about how imperial values and beliefs determined respectability and beauty during the Raj, the period of British sovereignty in India. Throughout her time in

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1. Marjorie Ussher to Mom, MSS Eur D859.5 3230-1, 23 October 1938, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

India, Marjorie Ussher, a white, single, British governess from Ireland, reflects on her perceptions of respectability and beauty.

Over the past three years of my undergraduate college experience, I worked as a Research Assistant for historian Rachel Neiwert, Ph.D.. In this role, I found, transcribed, coded, and analyzed more than 520 letters in Marjorie Ussher's archival collection. Through a framework based on the disciplines of history, literature, and aesthetics and a close reading of these primary source documents, I aim to deconstruct the concept of respectability, as understood by Marjorie Ussher in 1900s British India. These disciplines will act as a lens for reading and interpreting Ussher's letters.

Between the late 1500s and early 1700s, the British Empire ruled or administered various colonies, dominions, protectorates, and other territories. The empire began through the establishment of overseas possessions and trading posts. In 1757, after Great Britain colonized India, India became one of Britain's most significant colonies.<sup>2</sup> During this time, Britain, operating through the East India Company, depended on India as one of the primary sources of raw materials. Flash forward to 1924, after World War I, Britain's hold on the empire began to slip.<sup>3</sup> This loss of power was the result of Britain's inability to afford an empire, many subjects not desiring to be ruled, and the Royal Navy's failure to protect the widespread empire they created.

On April 3, 1905, in Northern Ireland, then part of the British Empire, Marjorie Ussher was born to Eva Oliver Reed and James Ussher. As Northern Irish Protestants, the Usshers

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2. Encyclopædia Britannica, "British Raj."

3. Ibid.

viewed themselves essentially as British and rejected their Irish identity. This identification with British social standards and values influenced Ussher's understanding of respectability.

Ussher served as a governess to the children of a white British military family 1934-1936 and later to the Indian royal family of Hyderabad, 1936-1943. In 1934, at the age of 29, Marjorie Ussher sailed to India to begin work as a governess with the Stirling family in Chakrata, Ootacamund, and Jubbulpore, India. As a governess, Ussher taught and trained the Stirling children on everything from reading to writing to drawing. After working with this white British family for a few years, Ussher utilized her connection to Mrs. Tasker. Tucker, another white British woman in the empire, to procure a more lucrative governess position with the Begum Sahiba Wali ud-Daula, an Indian royal ward of the Nizam of Hyderabad. Here, Ussher held nearly the same educational role as she did with the Stirlings, the main difference being the family's race. In a September 1936 letter to her family, Ussher introduces the Begum Sahiba's household. The family includes five children with two daughters, Ekbal and Vikar, 12 ½ and 10 ½ respectively, and three sons, Fareed, Karder, and Asman, 8 ½, 7, and 5 ½ respectively.<sup>4</sup> The father of the children receives no mention in the letters suggesting that he is either out of the picture or deceased. Begum Sahiba offered Ussher the job, and she started her position in Hyderabad, India, in the summer of 1936.

Ussher continued her work with Begum Sahiba until 1940 when she began work with an auxiliary group during World War II. Throughout her time working with Begum Sahiba, Ussher builds trust to the point where Begum Sahiba relies heavily on Ussher for daily help around the

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4. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.3 503, 6 September 1936, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

home and with the children. However, while working with Begum Sahiba, Ussher is not always on the clock and makes time for various social gatherings and vacations.

The idea of respectability as an ideal during the British Empire period serves as a fundamental reality to this research and corresponding paper. In Marjorie Ussher's perspective, many factors contribute to a person's respectability. Ussher views respectability as correct, proper, and socially acceptable adherence to class, race, nationality, gender roles and identities, occupation, age, personality, and manners. Some examples of these include marrying only amongst people of certain classes and races, not spending too much alone time with married people of the opposite sex, and working in positions that demonstrate support for and pride in one's nation. However, this thesis by no means has the space to explore all of these areas.

Ussher aims to convey a level of respectability both personally and in her interpretation of others. Marjorie Ussher's letters outline a strict definition of respectable beauty and aesthetics, which predominantly adheres to white British standards of respectability. These standards follow traditional gender roles and identities, behavior, dress, education, language, cleanliness, race, and class. While Ussher presents herself as a heterosexual woman, she recognizes the beauty of other women much more frequently than the beauty of men. This recognition likely results from the more significant pressure placed on women's attractiveness than on that of their male counterparts. Historical events, such as the World Wars and the phenomenon of colonialism, shaped beauty standards as a result of access to goods, exposure to other cultures, and available print culture.<sup>5</sup> Ussher acts according to the white British public perception of what it means to be a likable, attractive, and well-mannered woman in the 20th century British Empire to present

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5. Mason, Meghann, "The impact of World War II on women's fashion in the United States and Britain."

herself as a respectable British woman to her social circle and family back in Ireland. Not being seen as respectable in her social circle may create barriers to getting or maintaining a job in India. Similarly, if her family thought she was losing her respectability, they may suggest or force her to return to the United Kingdom or Ireland. Through the themes of race, apparel, and gender, Ussher presents herself as a respectable woman demonstrating how regular citizens, without specific motivations to promote the empire, understand and promote the imperial message and British social standards in their everyday lives.

### **Method**

The source material for this project includes more than 520 letters written weekly by governess Marjorie E. Ussher across a ten-year span. This analysis stems solely from the letters photographed by Rachel Neiwert, Ph.D. at the British Library in London, England. These letters, dated 1934-1943, were addressed predominantly to Ussher's parents with the occasional letter to her brother or sister and clear instructions with whom to share them. The letters prove both beneficial and challenging to our understanding of history. As Marjorie Ussher wrote predominantly to her parents, her reflections are likely more tailored and mediated than if she were writing to a friend. This modification to her intended audience may have led Ussher to filter information or describe it in a way that would make her appear more respectable to her family. While this audience means that the readers do not have access to Ussher's unfiltered thoughts, it instead allows for a greater understanding of how Ussher wishes to portray herself to her family and, subsequently, what society deems respectable than the reader could otherwise access.

Furthermore, while Ussher's archival collection proved extensive, many more letters were not included in the collection because they were written to Ussher, written by Ussher to others, or written by Ussher to her parents. These letters could be in a private collection

somewhere, lost, or destroyed. The omission of these letters serves as a limitation. It remains unclear whether these are not included because the previous collection owners did not have them, or whether someone intentionally omitted them to portray a specific image of Ussher. However, this collection also provides a historical perspective that otherwise would not exist. These letters expand the historical understanding of women's experience in the empire, the governess system, India during the Raj, and respectability in this context, among other topics.

In my first read-through of the letters, I made a note of every theme I saw in every message. I then proceeded to read through the topics I had collected and pulled out the ones that appeared most common and salient. I then reread the letters to make sure I had not missed anything in my first read-through. Initially, I decided to focus on beauty and social standards. However, after outlining the paper and gathering the examples and available literature, I discovered that the concept of respectability functioned at the core of these topics. With this new direction in mind, I reread the letters a third time, noting how respectability influenced Ussher's actions and reflections to her parents as well as its frequency. I then separated all the instances of respectability into broad categories. Ultimately, the themes of race, apparel, and gender emerged as most illustrative of promoting respectability to endorse British social standards and the Imperial message. Once the quotes tied to respectability were gathered, I applied a historical, literary, and aesthetic lens to the documents. By doing so, I was able to determine what was meaningful to highlight, such as the historical context that informed the example, literary aspects present in the letters, and the importance of different fabrics and styles of clothing.

### **Historiography**

This work holds a unique place in the current literature surrounding women's roles and respectability during the Raj. Marjorie Ussher provides a new understanding of how white

British people in British India demonstrated their respectability through concepts of race, gender, and apparel. While literature exists surrounding British respectability during the empire period as an ideal, they do not focus on these three themes as factors. This source set is different from the sources used by other authors in that they come from an ordinary person living out her everyday life as opposed to coming from a wealthy person or noble. As a typical person, Ussher lacks a specific motivation to promote the empire other than for self-promotion. However, it remains clear that Ussher both understands and advances the imperial message demonstrating how deeply British social standards influence regular people in the empire. The audience to which Ussher writes similarly presents an innovative argument for this thesis as she writes almost entirely to her parents, allowing a mediated view into respectability as it relates to race, gender, and apparel.

Literary, historical, and aesthetics lenses contribute to our understanding of respectability in Ussher's letters. Author Lois Tyson argues for the interpretation of letters through both a literary and historical lens in her book *Critical Theory Today: a user-friendly guide*. She explains that literary texts serve as "cultural artifacts that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings, operating in the time and place in which the text was written."<sup>6</sup> Tyson adds that "the literary text and the historical situation from which it emerged are equally important because text (the literary work) and context (the historical conditions that produced it) are mutually constitutive: they create each other."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, by reading Ussher's letters with both lenses, we, as the reader, gain a better understanding of the text itself and the context from which it arose. Similarly, taking an aesthetic approach to analyzing the letters

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6. Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: a user-friendly guide*, 291.

7. *Ibid.*, 291-292.

contributes to our knowledge of Marjorie Ussher and respectability in 1900s British India, which relied mostly on perceptions of beauty and dress.

Through literary technique, Ussher shapes her audience's knowledge of other people, her actions, and herself. Ussher forms the character types of those around her in the eyes of her parents. By describing the people she interacts with in ways that her parents would see as respectable or not respectable, Ussher has the power to shape their character in the eyes of her family. Ussher also illustrates sequential action in the telling of her daily activities. Further, Ussher creates a narrative self-consciousness through her musings on different decisions.

In the book *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* by writer Janet Altman, Altman follows the creation of the epistolary, or letter-novel, genre, emphasizing the importance of letters as literary objects. Altman's work reasons that using letters as a narrative device allows the author to develop thematic emphasis, shape character types, illustrate sequential action and create a narrative self-consciousness, all of which are visible in Ussher's letters.<sup>8</sup> Ussher creates thematic emphasis, intentionally or unintentionally, through the subjects she chooses to focus on in her letters. Some such themes include physical appearance, dress, and the respectability of those surrounding Ussher.

In her book, Altman also identifies significant characteristics of the genre of epistolary novels that apply to Ussher's letters. One such commonality Altman emphasizes is the idea of letters as epistolary mediation. Because letters link senders to receivers, they work as a sort of bridge attempting to bring the writer and receiver closer together.<sup>9</sup> This relationship is particularly true of Ussher, the writer of the letters, and her parents, the most common receivers

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8. Altman, *Epistolarity Approaches to a Form*, 8.

9. Altman, *Epistolarity Approaches to a Form*, 10.

of her correspondence. In reading Ussher's letters as a literary bridge between herself and her parents, the reader can gain an understanding of what Ussher deems as significant and how she attempts to communicate and narrativize respectability. According to historian David Gerber's book, *Authors of their Lives*, accruing social respectability is typically an immigrant's first project.<sup>10</sup> Gerber expands that this project often serves as the motivating factor for uprooting and dramatically transforming one's life. Social respectability similarly serves as one of Ussher's first projects upon arriving in India.

For the 12 years that Ussher lived in India, she wrote letters weekly to her family, mostly her mother and father, living back in Ireland. By considering the letters both as a form of literature and history, we gain a mediated testimony surrounding race, class, gender, and performance of imperial ideology. Unlike the literary canon, the historical canon has always accepted letters as primary sources.<sup>11</sup> Since people first began to write letters, they have served to form networks, bridge distances, and to strengthen relationships.<sup>12</sup> Literary historians have examined and appreciated their quality as historical sources. These sources contribute to our understanding of these far-off times and places, giving us a glimpse of people's everyday lives. Additionally, ordinary people can engage in the art of letter writing, creating a more accessible means for people to contribute to the historical narrative. As historical sources, the act of writing

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10. Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: the Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century*.

11. Von Tippelskirch, "Reading, Interpreting and Historicizing: Letters as Historical Sources."

12. Schulte and Tippelskirch, "Reading, Interpreting and Historicizing: Letters as Historical Sources," 5.

letters becomes an essential form of socio-cultural praxis and letters a significant communication method.<sup>13</sup>

Historians analyzing the Raj hold differing opinions on the role of women in empire building. Some authors, such as Indrani Sen, view women during the Raj as providers of “companionship in the home” and in the “civilizing mission’ beyond.”<sup>14</sup> This sentiment suggests a certain level of agency, ability to act independently and formulate one’s own decisions, held by the women both in the home and as empire builders.<sup>15</sup> Sen further argues that women uphold racial and social hierarchies perpetuating colonial rule.<sup>16</sup> Maya Jasanoff also supports the idea of women as empire builders explaining that thinking of them in these terms is a relatively new phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> Jasanoff asserts that the concept of empire in previous literature is mainly thought of as a masculine enterprise in which women have little agency. Other authors, such as Swapna Banerjee, view women’s role in the empire as shaped more by their domestic efforts. In his article “Debates on Domesticity and the Position of Women in Late Colonial India,” Banerjee discusses the new ideas of domesticity which arise under British rule in India suggesting that domesticity spurs change and the empowerment of women by giving them agency.<sup>18</sup> He then goes on to argue for greater participation by men and children in the domestic

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13. Ibid.

14. Sameen, “Gendered Transactions: The White Woman in Colonial India, c. 1820-1930.” 557–58.

15. Emirbayer and Mische, “What Is Agency?”

16. Sameen, “Gendered Transactions: The White Woman in Colonial India, c. 1820-1930.” 557–58.

17. Jasanoff. *Review of Women of the Raj: The Mothers, Wives, and Daughters of the British Empire in India*, 80.

18. Banerjee, “Debates on Domesticity and the Position of Women in Late Colonial India.”

field in order to share the burden and the power. Ussher's letters support the idea of women as empire builders by maintaining a sense of British superiority through respectable actions and appearance. For example, during the war effort, some women changed their purchasing behaviors so that they could donate funds to the empire. In this way, Ussher distances her culture from that of the Indian people and, in some instances, imposes her beliefs of proper self-presentation both among white British people and Indian people in the empire.

According to a journal article by Nupur Chaudhuri titled "The 'Incumberances': British Women in India" discussing the role women played in the empire and their motivations for going to the colonies, women often went to India to satisfy their role as wives or in search of a husband.<sup>19</sup> However, marriage was not the only reason women left the metropole. To maintain its influence during this empire period, Britain also sent women to its territories through the governess system. Governesses were women, who lived with families, often middle or upper class, and taught the children. Young women from middle-class homes often served in this type of role. These women educated both girls and boys, though boys were often sent to boarding schools once they were eight or when their families could afford it.<sup>20</sup> Governesses served as a status symbol and way to maintain children's British identity when they grew up in the empire far from the metropole. These women taught anything from reading and writing to piano and foreign languages.

The race, color, and ethnicity of people surrounding Ussher arose as a common theme throughout her life and letters. Sociologist Howard Winant explains that at a fundamental level, the term 'race' symbolizes and indicates sociopolitical conflicts and interests regarding different

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19. Chaudhuri, "The 'Incumberances': British Women in India, 1615-1856." 1111-12.

20. Hughes, *The Victorian Governess*, 203.

types of human bodies.<sup>21</sup> Socially and historically, people have based concepts of race on human biological characteristics as a means of racial signification. However, in actuality, no biological basis exists for differentiating people in terms of race, and socio-historical categories are imprecise if not wholly arbitrary.<sup>22</sup> Concepts of race arose along with the world political economy and continued to persist into twentieth-century British India and society today. Winant explains further that class-based race theories frame racial conflict as a means of expressing class conflict.<sup>23</sup> This thinking suggests that the post-war world that intergroup competition and racial stratification were well-defined.<sup>24</sup>

Racial stratification arises between both the British and Indians, as well as the British and Irish, Britain's first colonial project. Ussher, along with other white British persons living in this context, held white and fair-skinned people in high regard in 1934-1940 India. This way of thinking created a race-based understanding of respectability. The concept of race is socially constructed and includes both color and class formation. Anne McClintock explores this racialization of class differences in-depth with her description of class identity "as a social invention written in the language of clothes and physical signs."<sup>25</sup> This description suggests that class primarily comes down to material possessions and appearance. McClintock elaborates on

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21. Winant, "Race and Race Theory," 172.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 179.

24. Ibid.

25. McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*, 104.

perceptions of race at the time with white women perceived as clean, feminine, and elegant as opposed to non-white women viewed as filthy, masculine, and indecent in their clothing.<sup>26</sup>

In her performance of social etiquette, Ussher racializes those who do not follow the same standards. As seen through the letters, the concept of race is not fixed but always changing. For example, as an Irish woman, Ussher associates more with the British than the Irish. By doing so, Ussher can ensure that those she interacts with see her as white, which carries with it ideas of wealth and respectability. Colorism considers skin complexion while ignoring racial or ethnic group affiliation. The term refers to “the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of one's skin.”<sup>27</sup> Under this theory, people with lighter skin generally possess more privilege than people with darker skin across ethnic and racial groups. Within Ussher’s letters, we can see colorism in Ussher’s reflections surrounding people’s skin color, particularly of Indian people. Ethnicity relates instead to one’s association with a group of people with a common racial, national, linguistic, religious, cultural origin, or cultural background.<sup>28</sup> Ethnic ties also surface as a method by which people demonstrate respectability in Ussher’s letters.

To understand how Ussher and other white British persons imposed proper self-presentation, it is essential to understand the norms of pleasing self-presentation. In their 2015 book, *The Visible Self: Global Perspectives on Dress, Culture, and Society*, Joanne Bubolz Eicher, Sandra Lee Evenson, and Hazel A. Lutz provide an understanding of aesthetics during the Raj. George Santayana describes beauty as a “pleasing sensory experience,” expanding that,

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26. Ibid., 105.

27. Burke, Colorism, 17–18.

28. Merriam-Webster, “Ethnic.”

“Beauty is a value... it is an emotion, an affection of our volitional and appreciative nature. An object cannot be beautiful if it can give pleasure to nobody.”<sup>29</sup> This statement suggests that beauty is dependent upon the values present in the cultural and historical context in which it exists. Without creating pleasure, something cannot be said to be beautiful. Eicher, Evenson, and Lutz elaborate that standards of beauty are created by society in that there exists a desire to “conform to the expectations of others with whom [people] affiliate and yet display a desire to express their individuality as well.”<sup>30</sup> Society members tow a fine line between fitting in with what is expected and maintaining some uniqueness. Ideal appearance is, therefore, created, “As consensus develops about an ideal based on the values of members in the society, cultural ideals for pleasing appearance evolve.”<sup>31</sup> This consensus developed in relation to race, gender, and apparel. Throughout Ussher’s letters to her family, Ussher aims to adhere to the values and ideals of her perceived society, her family and friends back home, and white British people in the empire.

Sociologist Sri Devi Thakkilapati defines respectability, as “a form of symbolic capital that is produced within the conjugal (heterosexual, nuclear) family.”<sup>32</sup> This idea of British respectability as confined largely to traditional structures persists in Ussher’s letters. Ussher often describes respectability as it pertains to traditional British values such as gender roles and styles of acceptable dress. Historian Charles Reed expands on this concept of respectability relating it to the ideas of behavior, clothing, education, language, cleanliness, and social

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29. Eicher, *The Visible Self: Global Perspectives on Dress, Culture, and Society*, 314.

30. *Ibid.*, 309.

31. *Ibid.*, 335.

32. Thakkilapati, *Country Girls: Gender, Caste, and Mobility in Rural India*.

conservatism.<sup>33</sup> In reading the letters with this framework of ‘symbolic capital,’ we, as the reader, gain a better understanding of the factors motivating people’s actions and why Ussher may choose to include or exclude certain information from her letters.

One topic Ussher made an intentional effort to include in her recollections was fashion. According to Professor of Fashion, Arti Sandhu, during British colonial rule, balancing traditionally Indian and Western dress served as a turning point in Indian fashion.<sup>34</sup> While the Indian people Ussher interacts with present some desire for traditionally British characteristics and culture such as light skin and governesses, there remain some local cultural aspects that remain. The saree, for example, a product of the 1850s Indian Parsees’ and Chinese trade relations, stayed prevalent in the Indian culture even after the British brought in new clothing and styles, as seen through Ussher’s letters.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, Ussher and other British people in India adopted some traditional Indian forms of dress, such as the saree, suggesting that cultural exchange went in both directions. Tara Ghoshal Wallace's concept of British “mythmaking on [foreign] soil” further amplifies our understanding of this relationship.<sup>36</sup> Under this mythmaking, colonial spaces become mythical places characterized as otherworldly, bizarre, and romantic. The British reinforce these myths by adopting traditional and exotic styles of dress.

### **Race and Respectability**

Throughout Ussher’s letters to her parents, she makes frequent references to people’s race as a function of their and her respectability. Historian Peter Robb suggests that in the early

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33. Reed, “Positively Cosmopolitan: Britishness, Respectability, and Imperial Citizenship.”

34. Sandhu, *Indian Fashion: Tradition, Innovation, Style*, 25.

35. *Ibid.*, 26.

36. Wallace, *Imperial Characters: Home and Periphery in Eighteenth Century Literature*, 165.

twentieth-century, whiteness connoted dominance, Europe-born, elite, and respectable.<sup>37</sup> The racial component of respectability holds in Ussher's letters in that elite and middle-class white Europeans outrank lower-class Europeans and non-white Indians. This ranking is the result of native and low-class inferiority present during the time.<sup>38</sup> By drawing lines between native and low-class inferiority, Robb emphasizes that the two concepts are intrinsically connected. This section will demonstrate how race influenced respectability through the eyes of Marjorie Ussher.

Being from Ireland, Ussher derives her understanding of race-related aesthetic standards from her Irish and, more broadly, British upbringing. English colonization and racialization of the Irish in 1611 complicates this identity.<sup>39</sup> Ussher serves as an embodiment of the tensions between the British and the Irish. As she grew up in Northern Ireland, Ussher's allegiance aligns more with the British. During this time, Ireland waffled between staying with the United Kingdom and seeking to regain their independence.<sup>40</sup> Some Irish people recognized the poverty prevalent in Ireland and believed that the British crown could protect their well-being. Ussher, as one of these people, recognizes her Irish identity while simultaneously promoting British values and ideas.<sup>41</sup> As a result, Ussher becomes more resolute in her practice of colorist superiority.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, elite European women treasured white skin.<sup>42</sup> In a 1938 letter to her mother, Ussher reflects upon her meeting of Susan Shounie, a staff

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37. Robb, "The Meaning of White: Race, Class, and the 'Domiciled Community' in British India 1858–1930, by Satoshi Mizutani."

38. *Ibid.*, 123.

39. Takaki, "The Tempest in the Wilderness: The Racialization of Savagery," 893.

40. Agee, *The New North : Contemporary Poetry from Northern Ireland*.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Eicher, *The Visible Self: Global Perspectives on Dress, Culture, and Society*, 7.

member of Mahindra from county Wexford, Ireland. She explains that Shounie, “although very nice would not strike one as a S. of Ireland girl. She is a prim, precise little thing.”<sup>43</sup> The first part of this statement suggests a blanket niceness of all girls from Southern Ireland. However, Shounie differs from others from this region in her primness and preciseness. Despite this different manner, Shounie’s origins as a white woman and niceness cause Ussher to see her as a fine and respectable girl. Upon meeting another Irish woman, in Ussher’s 1939 letter to her parents describing Mary Mescall, it is apparent that the same standards continue to shape Ussher’s understanding of beauty even five years after she initially arrived in British India. In this letter, Ussher states, “Mary is a most attractive girl from Tipperary – I like her immensely.”<sup>44</sup> In this seemingly simple quote, the reader learns two things about Mescall, first, that she is attractive either in physical behavior or both, and second, that she comes from Tipperary, a county in central Ireland. From these two simple things, her pleasing aesthetic and behavior and her race, presumably white, Ussher has determined her immense liking of this person.

Although Marjorie Ussher returned to India to work for an Indian family, she holds a clear, preconceived, negative notion about the respectability of non-white persons. This understanding of respectability becomes visible in her musings on the beauty or lack thereof of people of other races. It is necessary to investigate the standards of respectability, who Ussher interacted with, and Ussher’s racial comparisons to unpack this understanding, which likely represents the views of other white British persons living in this context.

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43. Marjorie Ussher to Mom, MSS Eur D859.5 3122, 18 February 1938, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

44. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.6 3271, 22 January 1939, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

Race-related aesthetic standards also dictate with whom Ussher chooses to spend her time. To present herself as a respectable British woman, Ussher defends her interactions with Begum Sahiba. In a 1936 letter to her parents, Ussher reasons, “there is absolutely no need for you to worry about – Begum Sahiba has got very advanced ideas and a very European outlook – indeed I believe she is looked on as being very exceptional for an Indian.”<sup>45</sup> By explaining away her parents’ fear, Ussher confirms her trepidation that her association with an Indian woman would hinder her respectability. Associating Begum Sahiba’s thinking with European ideas and ways of thought suggests that Ussher will not revert to lesser intellectual integrity. However, she clarifies that Begum Sahiba is not quite as exceptional as Europeans with the addendum “for an Indian.” Edward Said’s book, *Orientalism*, aids our understanding of this power configuration. Said argues that in non-totalitarian societies, particular cultural forms always predominate over others, making specific ideas more influential than others.<sup>46</sup> During the British colonization of India, this power dichotomy splits orient, countries of Asia, and occident, western countries such as the United Kingdom. Within this dichotomy, “Indians were civilizationally, if not racially, inferior.”<sup>47</sup> Western people, such as the British, further mentally designated Orientals as “backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded.”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, by reassuring her parents of Begum Sahiba’s progressive ideas and European outlook, Ussher disassociates herself and Begum Sahiba, at least in part, from the inferior Indian culture.

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45. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.3 509, 16 June 1936, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

46. Said, *Orientalism*, 7.

47. *Ibid.*, 14.

48. *Ibid.*, 207.

Ussher's taste for British aesthetic standards comes through in her comparisons between British and Indian people. When writing to her parents in 1937, Ussher explains this English ideal, stating, "The [Indian] children are not nearly so attractive as ours. They are all fat & flabby looking & the Begum Sahiba is nothing like as refined as ours."<sup>49</sup> This quote suggests the appearance of fatness and flabbiness, which Ussher associates with the local Indian population, to be unattractive and unrespectable. Ussher also stresses the importance of being refined and sophisticated even for children. While looking at some of Begum Sahiba's old photos as they prepare for Ekbal's wedding, Ussher contemplates her thoughts on the practice of arranged marriage in India. Ussher believes so intensely in the superiority of white British culture and aesthetic standards that she laments, "I honestly believe that if it were possible [Begum Sahiba] would change their colour so that they could all marry English people, but she is sensible enough to realize the folly of their doing so as Indians."<sup>50</sup> Whether this reflects Begum Sahiba's thoughts on the situation remains unclear. Still, the assertion likely stands on the grounds of her inclination towards other traditionally English practices like hiring a British governess and believing that marriage should come later in life. However, Ussher recognizes that it would be a mistake for Indians to marry British persons. The most likely interpretation of this statement is that Begum Sahiba is a realist and has seen the ostracization of other biracial Indian-English couples. This realism may drive Begum Sahiba to view a strictly Indian match as the most respectable and best possible outcome for her children. During the Raj, the British socially constructed several racial categories, such as Anglo-Indian, as a means of establishing racial

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49. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.3 533, 15 July 1937, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

50. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.3 546, 29 July 1936, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

difference. In terms of respectability, Anglo-Indians fell between Indians and white persons though both groups effectively isolated them.<sup>51</sup> As a result, both the British and Indians married almost exclusively within their group, likely shaping Begum Sahiba's views toward her own children's marriage.<sup>52</sup> British ostracism made Anglo-Indians largely, though it is argued never entirely, endogamous.

One example of this ostracization of biracial couples surfaces in a 1939 letter Ussher wrote to her parents. In this letter, Ussher comments on the soon to be wife of Sandy Parker, a previously married white man who works for the Imperial Bank. Ussher explains that Sandy Parker's "bride is an Anglo Indian – quite fair & English looking, but goodness knows what the children will be like!"<sup>53</sup> Ussher sets off this woman's race as an Anglo Indian with a dash (–), evidently leaving space for her parents to come to their conclusions on the respectability of Sandy Parker marrying a non-white person. However, she soon after clarifies that for someone who is not white, this woman is "quite fair & English looking," making her more respectable. However, Sandy Parker's children will not automatically receive the looks and manners of their parents, calling to question the future respectability of their children as a result of their mixed race.

In Ussher's mind, the white, British aesthetic standard also applies to non-white persons. When attending the wedding ceremony of Akeel Jung's daughter and Najuf Ali Khan, Ussher further reinforces this British aesthetic standard. Ussher explains, "some of the younger girls

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51. Charlton-Stevens, *Decolonizing Anglo-Indians*.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.6 3312, 25 September 1939, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

were extraordinarily pretty. The members of one family were very remarkable because they had all blue eyes.”<sup>54</sup> As blue eyes appear relatively infrequently among Indians and relatively frequently among Europeans, the remarkableness of this family exists mainly in their similarity to aesthetically pleasing European persons. In other cases, Ussher expresses little reasoning behind her disdain for certain groups of people. For example, Ussher displays an evident lack of respect for the Parsee, Persian Zoroastrian descendants who initially fled to India to avoid persecution by Muslims, ethnicity.<sup>55</sup> For example, in a letter to her mother dated 1939, Ussher writes, “Indeed at the best of times Parsees are not at all good-looking – there are very few pretty women amongst them & I don’t like the type of sarees they wear. At the Hindu wedding of the Dhobi’s daughter – the women were much more attractive!”<sup>56</sup> Ussher’s apparent dislike of Parsees may be the result of differences in physical characteristics from her British aesthetic standard or internalized bias picked up from other people’s thoughts, feelings, and discussion of the group.

As a regular citizen writing to her parents, Ussher’s reflections present a mediated understanding of the imperial message and British social standards surrounding race. Through her discussions of race, readers gain a better understanding of racial standards of respectability. These standards fall primarily along the lines of being white and British. Ussher also discusses what does not meet the standard, namely nonwhite Indians, Parsees, and, in some cases, the Irish.

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54. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.3 611, 26 November 1936, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

55. Encyclopædia Britannica, “Parsi.”

56. Marjorie Ussher to Mom, MSS Eur D859.6 3269, 15 January 1939, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

This white English ideal surfaced in who Ussher interacted with and how she presents herself, displaying the role that race plays on respectability.

### **Apparel and Respectability**

Marjorie Ussher's letters also make frequent reference to people's apparel as a factor of their respectability. During the time, British clothing signified a "racial superiority, modernity, refinement, masculinity and power over Indians," necessitating contemplation regarding clothing choices and self-presentation.<sup>57</sup> Ussher outlines a clear standard for clothing to adhere to, including specific types of clothing and colors, modern, not old-fashioned clothes, and displaying a level of wealth. However, as Edward Said points out, the Occident expresses "a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world."<sup>58</sup> In this way, the British appropriate apparel from the Indian culture as part of their own. Along with increasing the wearer's respectability, wearing the right clothing increases the person's likability.

One-way people demonstrated respectability and elite status was through expensive clothing choices signifying wealth. Ussher brags that her New Year's Day party outfits "was one of the smartest costumes in the room."<sup>59</sup> For her outfit, Ussher "chose a glorious shade of Bocara silk (1/per yd) & a pierette type of thing with an enormous white organdi ruff piped with green round my neck – Black silk scarf tied on [her] head & black shoes – white organdi ruffs piped with green on my wrists – the costume was cut very well & fitted perfectly – [her] legs were

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57. Sandhu, *Indian Fashion: Tradition, Innovation, Style*, 27.

58. Said, *Orientalism*, 12.

59. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.4 2935, 1 January 1937, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

greatly admired.”<sup>60</sup> Not only did she buy the fanciest of materials for her outfit, but she had it perfectly made and fitted as well.

Respectable apparel choices further contribute to a person’s likability, as viewed through Ussher’s description of Mrs. Blake. Ussher explains that Mrs. Blake, the wife of the present O.C. hospital, “is a pretty very well dressed woman & I like her very much too.”<sup>61</sup> Blake’s attractiveness and apparel decisions contribute to her respectability and Ussher’s desire to spend time with her. By adhering to this clear standard of apparel outlined in Ussher’s letters, which includes types of clothing, colors, modern styles, and wealthy appearance, people could uphold a level of respectability. Ussher’s itemization of various textiles and elaborate clothing demonstrates that she financially makes enough money to maintain an opulent lifestyle. The itemization also highlights the fact that the people Ussher surrounds herself with are similarly well off. With limited trade during the World Wars and a slowed global economy, this access to and ability to afford luxury apparel would have been particularly impressive and demanding of respect.

Apparel decisions include hairstyles and accessories, acting as a form of wearable art. Wearable art serves to differentiate wearers by highlighting their individuality and increasing their visibility in the group.<sup>62</sup> Color also plays an essential role in respectable fashion. Reds and golds surfaced as a common thread of acceptable colors. On attending Vikar, Begum Saheba’s youngest daughter, and Kadja’s wedding, Ussher notes, “Vikar looked really beautiful in her

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60. Ibid.

61. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.1 232, 14 November 1934, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

62. Eicher, *The Visible Self: Global Perspectives on Dress, Culture, and Society*, 379.

strawberry coloured & gold clothes. She is tall & stately & carries herself very well.”<sup>63</sup> These colors give Vikar an almost regal appearance. Other colors, such as plum, are not held in the same regard. While attending Mr. Hocklin’s, Director General of the Police, daughter’s wedding, Ussher reflects on the beauty of the bride before adding that “the Bridesmaids were the only failure - their dresses, plum colour, were most unbecoming and unattractive.”<sup>64</sup> Had it not been for the color, the dresses would have been much more successful. At a wedding, Ussher explains that “the M-in-law brushed & combed the girls hair & taking a bottle from a yellow velvet tray poured oil on her head. She then took about six strands of hair on each side & bound each with gold & red thread. After this, she plaited the whole thing in one long plait tied with a gold ribbon at the end.”<sup>65</sup> During the time, people would have viewed this hairstyle, bound and plaited with gold and velvet as refined and opulent. *The Dictionary of Fashion History* explains velvet as “An imported silk fabric, from Spain, Italy or France, with a short dense pile, which could be cut or uncut, above a satin ground which might incorporate gold or silver threads.”<sup>66</sup> As an imported fabric, people would have viewed velvet as a luxury item that the everyday person could not afford. The gold threads similarly would have suggested superiority and respectability. The use of oil would have elevated this braid even further, adding a shiny finish. The same wedding included extravagant showings of precious metals, such as gold and silver, and flowers. Ussher details that “the bride groom was wearing a gold shevani, gold dustar, white pyjamas & gold

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63. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.6 3327, 14 October 1940, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

64. Marjorie Ussher to Mom, MSS Eur D859.7 3403, 31 May 1940, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

65. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.3 612, 26 November 1936, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

66. Cumming, “Velvet,” 276.

shoes. King from his head over his shoulders were dozens of chains of flowers, white and pink, intertwined with gold & silver cords, his head seemed waited down with the weight of them all.”<sup>67</sup> This elaborate display of wealth demonstrates the respectability of the wedding as well as those involved.

On the occasion of a different marriage, Ussher participates in the extravagant displays. To maintain acceptable standards, Ussher “wore [her] green Taffeta dress for the occasion & all [her] jewels as Begum Saheba wanted us to look our grandest!!!”<sup>68</sup> Wearing fine taffeta and jewels demonstrates Ussher’s ability to afford more extravagant things due to her respectable position in society. Taffeta is “a plain, glossy, silk fabric” often giving the appearance of wealth.<sup>69</sup> From the eighteenth century on, raw silk served as an essential trade commodity, and during the twentieth century, the British were one of its leading importers.<sup>70</sup> Between 1927 and 1930, the aggregate value of world silk trade and production reached about 30% of the value of the cotton trade and 65% of the wool trade.<sup>71</sup> This high level of aggregate demand for silk suggests that the material was highly sought after and desired at the time, particularly in Britain.

In Ussher’s view, wearing modern instead of old-fashioned clothes also plays into a person’s respectability. To assure her parents that she is in line with current clothing trends, Ussher remarks, “I’ve just had the tailor in & handed him over all my dresses to shorten, they are

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67. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.3 613, 26 November, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

68. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.6 3320, 8 October 1939, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

69. Cumming, “Taffeta,” 272.

70. Ma, “The Modern Silk Road: The Global Raw-Silk Market, 1850-1930,” 353-354.

71. *Ibid.*, 331.

looking old-fashioned”!<sup>72</sup> Here, Ussher demonstrates her desire to conform to the standards of dress. Further, the way she says ‘I’ve just had the tailor in’ suggests that this happens rather often. Mrs. Stirling also attempts to maintain a level of respectability through clothing choices. According to Ussher, “Mrs. Stirling has taken out 64 yds of material to have made up into frocks for herself and the children! She has some very pretty evening frocks.”<sup>73</sup> Not only is that a large and likely expensive quantity of material to buy, but having clothing made from it for the entire family would not have been cheap. Evening frocks only add to this expense.

Ussher stresses looking clean and put-together with specific types of clothing as another contributor to respectability. Writing to her parents, Ussher compares and contrasts two of the women she spends time with in India. She describes, “Mrs. Van & ‘Birdie’ are of course very different in appearance – the one so neat & tidy, the other in the most weird outfit.”<sup>74</sup> While Mrs. Van receives praise for looking clean and put-together, Birdie gets slack for having a ‘weird outfit’ and likely being less neat and tidy than Mrs. Van. To conform to the current fashion and climate, Ussher describes her fashion choices to her mother. This description demonstrates the intentionality Ussher puts into her daily outfit choices as she explains, “for a few days I was wearing a woolen jumper etc. but have gone back into cotton frocks.”<sup>75</sup> Woolen jumpers are wool sweaters worn during the colder weather, and cotton frocks are lightweight British dresses

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72. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.6 3279, 22 March 1939, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

73. Marjorie Ussher to Florence, MSS Eur D859.1 59, 23 March 1934, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

74. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.7 3448, 7 September 1940, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

75. Marjorie Ussher to Mom, MSS Eur D859.3 450, 3 January 1936, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

worn by women during warmer weather.<sup>7677</sup> Despite the cold winter weather, Ussher went back to the colder but more attractive cotton frocks to maintain appearances. This choice stresses the importance of fashion over utility. Ussher also stresses the importance of functionality to her clothing choices, explaining, “My navy slacks & shirt are a great blessing”<sup>78</sup> because of the ease of wearing them, unlike dresses. She clarifies that “there is a good ironing room where one can press dresses etc. but one wants to be in there just as little as possible during the hot weather.”<sup>79</sup> By opting for the slacks which do not need ironing, Ussher minimizes the time she puts into her clothing while still looking fashionable.

Similarly, to demonstrate the respectability of her family through looking clean and put-together, Begum Sahiba has clothing made for her son, Fareed. Before a parade, “Begum Saheba & [Marjorie Ussher] had to rush into town, buy material & get the tailor to make a shevani for Fareed we got green and silver brocade and it looked lovely on him.”<sup>80</sup> A brocade is a “fabric with a pattern of raised figures” of “silk interwoven with threads of gold and silver.”<sup>81</sup> Through this fabric, the family demonstrated both their wealth and respectability through clothing. Ability to afford such a material would have functioned as a barrier limiting access of this fabric to extremely affluent. This quote also displays the care-taking role women have with

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76. Cambridge English Dictionary, “Jumper.”

77. Dictionary.com, “Frock.”

78. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.3 491, 25 May 1936, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

79. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.3 491, 25 May 1936, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

80. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.4 2955, 25 February 1937, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

81. Cumming, “Brocade,” 234.

their male counterparts. Though having a mother help decide on their child's clothing is relatively common, Begum Sahiba also includes Ussher in the outfitting adventure. Ussher's inclusion in this process suggests the importance of respectable dress and the efforts of women to help the men around them maintain these social standards.

Society also places value on the thrown-together look, which encompasses attractive clothing choices and limited effort. For example, while attending a party hosted by several staff members from the St. George's Grammar School, Ussher explains to her parents, "my costume was really very attractive although made up of old odds & ends which I had in my trunk."<sup>82</sup> From the nineteenth century onwards, the word 'costume' was used to refer to "the appearance, i.e. clothing, hairstyle and other decorations, which distinguished a particular class, nation or historic period."<sup>83</sup> Ussher boasts her outfit while attempting to underplay the effort she put into it with the phrasing of 'old odds & ends.' Setting the trend also plays into respectability along with following the trend. At the Fancy Dress Ball at the club, Ussher writes to her parents, "I wore the costume which I bought for last year's show. On that occasion, it was the only one of its kind in the room – for this year's dance it had been copied by three other people – quite obviously copied too!"<sup>84</sup> Here, Ussher asserts that she wore the now fashionable dress first, and now many others were wearing it too. This trendsetting reaffirms her taste in apparel and respectability. In certain situations, beauty even took precedence over function. While attending a wedding, she reflects on the style choices of the bride remarking that "while she was away a number of chains

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82. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.6 3332, 26 October 1940, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

83. Cumming, "Costume," 56.

84. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.5 3090, 14 January 1938, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

of flowers were tied to her head & these hung down in front of her face covering it completely. (I wonder if she didn't suffocate!!!).<sup>85</sup> To present a particular natural image, the bride rejected functionality and comfort in favor of fashion.

However, many of these clothes are anything but natural, taking exploitation and many hours of labor to create. The modern raw-silk trade reflects relationships of exploitation, unequal exchange, and imperialism between the Orient and Occident.<sup>86</sup> By highlighting Begum Sahiba's wearing of fine silk, Ussher emphasizes her association with people of refined fabric taste and respectable apparel choices associated with wealth and a civilized nature. Leathers, hides, or animal skins, also allow people to show their wealth and respectability through apparel.<sup>87</sup> In Ussher's acknowledgment that Begum Sahiba wanted them to 'look [their] grandest,' it becomes apparent that surrounding herself with attractive looking Europeans adds to Begum Sahiba's respectability amongst her peers. In a letter to her parents, Ussher boasts, "I am the proud possessor of a lovely brown crocodile hand bag and shoes to match ... The bag is beauty & will wear forever."<sup>88</sup> Her parents would have viewed objects such as these as exotic and expensive to those living in the United Kingdom, making the fact that she has both and that they match quite impressive and respectable. She then assures her parents of the attractiveness of her purchase and their quality, allowing them to last forever. Ussher also suggests her desire to send leathers back to her family. She tells her parents that she "would like to send [them] one of their lovely

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85. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.3 613, 26 November 1936, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

86. Ma, "The Modern Silk Road: The Global Raw-Silk Market, 1850-1930," 331.

87. Cumming, "Leather," 254.

88. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.7 3450, 7 September 1940, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

coloured suede belts but [is] so afraid it would be lost en route.”<sup>89</sup> *The Dictionary of Fashion History* describes suede as “calfskin specially treated to produce a silky, slightly napped finish, this type of leather originated in Sweden.”<sup>90</sup> Because of the time-consuming process to make suede and its ties to Europe, people held suede textiles in high regard. This sentiment suggests that the leather good would have value and be in style back in the United Kingdom as well.

Her parents would have seen direct access to these desirable goods as respectable. Clothing from other European markets also demonstrated wealth and respectability. For example, at a gala dinner and dance, Ussher states that “There was a great variety of costumes, Mrs. Stirling wore a very handsome Spanish one.”<sup>91</sup> Mrs. Stirling’s ability to afford and obtain a Spanish dress for the dance would have been seen as a symbol of her wealth and status. Material and fit also play into the perception of respectability and wealth.

Ussher moreover seems to differentiate locals’ apparel standards from her British counterparts. Specifically, Ussher dislikes the appearance and dress of the Parsees. In a message to her mother, Ussher explains that “the official Parsee dress for men is most unattractive, they wear most unbecoming little brown hats & long white coats.”<sup>92</sup> Ussher does not agree with this style though and makes her dislike for Parsees’ appearance known adding, “Indeed at the best of times Parsees are not at all good-looking – there are very few pretty women amongst them & I

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89. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.7 3450, 7 September 1940, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

90. Cumming, “Suede,” 272.

91. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.1 55, 21 March 1934, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

92. Marjorie Ussher to Mom, MSS Eur D859.6 3269, 15 January 1939, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

don't like the type of sarees they wear.”<sup>93</sup> However, this dislike does not transfer to all sarees as Ussher admires Ranees', another Indian woman, saree on an Indian outing she accompanies. After praising Ranees' on her attractiveness, English speaking ability, sensibility, and conversational ability, she compliments her on her outfit. Ussher writes, “She was dressed in a beautiful green sarai with a gold border round it. Her sister whom they hope to marry this year is very attractive in appearance – she looked simply charming in a blue & white sarai – the latter is really a most becoming graceful garment.”<sup>94</sup> Unlike the Parsees' sarees, Ussher views Ranees' and her sister's sarees as graceful and living up to Ussher's color specifications for respectability.

Ussher's mediated reflections portray how regular citizens understood the imperial message and British social standards surrounding respectable apparel and aesthetics. Within her letters, Ussher stresses the importance of looking clean and put-together, but with minimal effort, modern and not old-fashioned, and adhering to specific colors, styles, and fabrics. However, as seen through the letters, Ussher differentiates locals' apparel standards from her British counterparts. Additionally, some of the clothing choices demonstrate relationships of exploitation, unequal exchange, and imperialism between the British and Indian populations. In their deliberation surrounding clothing choices, British people upheld British social standards and imperial messaging related to respectability, wealth, and status.

### **Gender and Respectability**

Throughout her letters, Marjorie Ussher makes frequent, gender-divided references of people's manners and appearance as a function of their respectability. Out of the 91 mentions of

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93. Marjorie Ussher to Mom, MSS Eur D859.6 3269, 15 January 1939, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

94. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.3 515-516, 19 June 1936, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

people's looks in Ussher's letters, 68 (74.73%) of them reference women with only 23 (25.27%) mentions of men. This increased awareness of women's beauty demonstrates the heightened standards placed on women's appearance and respectability in British India. Ussher feels these constraints, as one can see from her regular mentions of her own fashion choices and looks. It may also reflect the more significant amount of time Ussher spends with women as a result of prevalent gender expectations. These expectations dictate that white British women predominantly interact with other women and men only in the presence of others. These mentions display Ussher's desire to appear respectable in the eyes of her recipient, her family, and her British colleagues.

Ussher sets her standards of respectability and appearance in conjunction with her lived experience in the United Kingdom and the perceptions of other white British persons in India. This standard for women includes looking well-kept, but not overly so, and acting according to societal norms and expectations, among other things, as seen in Charles Reed's framework for respectability. Both of these qualities arise in Ussher's discussion of Mrs. Mae. On October 23, 1938, Ussher writes that Mrs. Mae "is one of the most splendid people I know & seems to combine many virtues & qualities, very good looking – well dressed (in fact extremely so) very witty, clever & well read & the kindest most thoughtful person one could ever meet."<sup>95</sup> Mrs. Mae conforms to Ussher's proper standards of looking well-kept both in her appearance as 'very good looking' and style of dress as 'well dressed (in fact extremely so).' In her book, *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock describes cleanliness as a distinguishing factor for class.

Soap did not flourish when imperial ebullience was at its peak. It emerged commercially during an era of impending crisis and social calamity, serving to preserve, through fetish ritual, the uncertain boundaries of class, gender and race identity in a social order felt to

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95. Marjorie Ussher to Mom, MSS Eur D859.5 3230-1, October 1938, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

be threatened by the fetid effluvia of the slums, the belching smoke of industry, social agitation, economic upheaval, imperial competition, and anticolonial resistance. Soap offered the promise of spiritual salvation and regeneration through commodity consumption, a regime of domestic hygiene that could restore the threatened potency of the imperial body politic.<sup>96</sup>

In this passage, McClintock draws clear boundaries between the clean and civilized colonizers and the unclean and uncivilized colonized population. Soap represents a symbolic and literal cleansing intended to civilize and enlighten those who use it. Therefore, cleanliness serves as a means of imposing discipline, social order, and symbolic control of the body.

Ussher's concentration on her peers' well-kept and clean nature suggests her desire to associate with the clean and civilized British colonizers as opposed to the unclean and uncivilized Indian population. Along a similar vein, Ussher bashes other women for being too put-together. In a letter to her entire family, written on her initial trip to India, for example, Ussher describes some of the other first-class passengers she interacts with on the boat. Ussher writes, "Needless to say the ladies in the party are very artificial looking."<sup>97</sup> This statement ties a negative connotation to looking 'artificial' as one can see through the underlined 'very.' Therefore, it is crucial that women look put-together, but not to the point that it appears unnatural. This balance illustrates the British ideals of moderation and rationality in terms of excess.<sup>98</sup> By avoiding excess indulgences in objects and appearance, but still looking presentable, people could toe the line of proper moderation.

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96. McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*, 211.

97. Marjorie Ussher to Everybody, MSS Eur D859.1 47, 17 march 1934, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

98. Levine, *Sexuality, Gender, and Empire*.

Marjorie Ussher's letters also demonstrate the importance of maintaining a well-kept appearance, but not overly well-kept to upholding women's respectability. For example, regarding her beauty routine, Ussher explains to her parents, "One of my war economies now is to do my own hair & give the money instead to an aeroplane fund."<sup>99</sup> A war economy refers to an economy in which the Government prioritizes the production of certain goods and services to support the war effort.<sup>100</sup> To finance World War II, the British Empire had to find a feasible balance between "taxation, internal borrowing, and inflation."<sup>101</sup> This economic model meant that available funds for armament hinged on the government's ability to impose taxes and the willingness of British subjects to accept sacrifices for their empire. Ussher's statement asserts several truths. First, Ussher typically has her hair done and will continue to do so, thereby maintaining a well-kept appearance and second, that she cares so much about the war effort that she would sacrifice her beauty. Ussher's parents likely would have seen this as respectable and potentially even a noble sacrifice.

To maintain acceptable standards, women must further adhere to specific manners and appearances. People expected women to be well rounded and attractive following traditional female values. After attending a party at the Tasker's, Ussher reflects that "Everything that Jessie [Tasker] does is well organized & attractive. She is full of good ideas."<sup>102</sup> Ussher praises Mrs. Tasker for characteristics traditionally seen as feminine, such as housekeeping and beauty.

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99. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.7 3450, 7 September 1940, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

100. Imlay, "Democracy and War: Political Regime, Industrial Relations, and Economic Preparations for War in France and Britain up to 1940," 1.

101. *Ibid.*, 6.

102. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.8 3592, 16 November 1941, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

Society also expected women to be entertaining, as one can see from Ussher's description of Begum Sahiba. Some of the women even found ways to play this to their advantage. According to Ussher, "all the men fall for her - she has got a very attractive manner and can be most amusing."<sup>103</sup> Based off of her manner and personality, Begum Sahiba can win the hearts of men likely a partial source of her power. When Ussher gets a new nursery ayah, a native nursemaid often employed by Europeans in India, she similarly judges them based on their adherence to a feminine standard. Ussher states, "My nursery ayah wasn't nearly as nice in appearance or manner as the dear old one."<sup>104</sup> This statement suggests an expected attractiveness and set of manners, even for local women and those in service roles. However, men do not have to adhere to the same standard as women. This dynamic surfaces in Ussher's description of Ekbal and her husband, who "seems to have no imagination at all & doesn't set about winning her in the right away."<sup>105</sup> As a man, Ekbal's husband can get away with not putting a lot of effort into the relationship. Ussher elaborates, "I think he is a good man- reliable, steady but not attractive in manners or appearance"<sup>106</sup> Despite lacking in manners and appearance, Ussher defends Ekbal's husband for being reliable and steady, something that should be the bare minimum.

Ussher even suggests that some women should give up their manners and appearances to be with men. For example, in a letter to her dad, Ussher explains that Ekbal's husband "is really

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103. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.5 3091, 14 January 1938, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

104. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.6 3341, 1 December 1939, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

105. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.6 3331, 26 October 1940, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

106. Ibid.

most unsuitable for her, however if she loses all her keenness, & enthusiasm, she may settle down & adapt herself to his mode of life - all her charm, talents + education are just wasted - he is so stodgy and set.”<sup>107</sup> Therefore, even when women possess all the desired qualities, people expect women to give them up to please men. It is interesting to note that Ussher pens this letter to her parents, suggesting a desire to assure her parents that she has maintained her British values and respectability. Ussher’s statements may also serve as a form of posturing to impress her parents and those with which they share her letters.

Marriage is another situation with strict gendered norms and expectations surrounding respectability. Societal expectations regarding gender arise predominantly surrounding marriage, wifely duties, and manners, and appearance. Society expected people to marry young, but not too young and not get divorced to follow what Ussher and her society deemed to be a suitable marriage. These norms arise in Ussher’s reflections about Ekbal, Begum Sahiba’s oldest daughter. Ussher asserts her view of Ekbal as much too young for marriage, explaining that “the poor child is very upset about it and doesn’t want to marry the man at all. He is 23 years older than she is – has been married before & divorced – most unattractive in appearance & manner.”<sup>108</sup> Ussher points out Ekbal’s suitors’ age difference and previous marriage and divorce as factors against their being a suitable and respectable match. The man also falls short of Ussher’s appearance and manner expectations.

In addition to conforming to respectable marriage expectations, women must also adhere to specific wifely duties. In a letter to her father, Ussher states, “I’m glad you like Mrs. Cranston

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107. Marjorie Ussher to Dad, MSS Eur D859.7 3372, 22 March 1940, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

108. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.6 3315, 1 October 1939, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

- she will probably make him a very good wife.”<sup>109</sup> Here, Ussher demonstrates her pleasure in her father liking Mrs. Cranston solely because of her ability to make a good wife, not on her merits. Innocence, charm, and purity also play an essential part in one’s wifely duties. In a letter to her parents about Vicar and Kadja, Ussher writes, “she is so innocent & quaint about it all & very much the “blushing bride.””<sup>110</sup> The phrase ‘blushing bride’ references a virgin or someone with limited sexual experience, making them anxious about their wedding night. Sexual purity would serve as another standard of respectability during the time. People also expected wives to maintain certain perceptions seen through Ussher’s praises of Colonel Hill’s as a “pretty & charming”<sup>111</sup> wife. All these statements also include a possessive suggesting women’s attachment to men and in the eyes of society.

For men’s respectability, maintaining a well-kept appearance holds less importance. When talking about the Bishop of Lucknow, a city in Northern India, Ussher states that he “is a delightful man. Very tall & good looking & thoroughly enjoyed playing badminton.”<sup>112</sup> Though Ussher still places importance on the appearance of men, it surfaces more in terms of qualities that they cannot control, such as height.

While Ussher admires some men for their appearance, not having an attractive appearance does not appear to present the same barriers for men as it does for women. For example, in her reflections on Neville, Ussher’s brother, Ussher details, “He has good manners,

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109. Marjorie Ussher to Dad, MSS Eur D859.2 256, 3 January 1935, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

110. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.6 3331, 26 October 1940, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

111. Marjorie Ussher to Mom and Dad, MSS Eur D859.1 251, 30 December 1934, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

112. Marjorie Ussher to Mom, MSS Eur D859.1 135, 24 June 1934, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

appearance, charm & ability so wants all the scope he can get. He is completely wasted as a trooper,” but “his intellect is stronger than his physique.”<sup>113</sup> Even though Neville lacks an attractive figure, Ussher decides that his intelligence, as well as decent appearance, personality, and skills, make up for his fault. This comment reflects how personality and intelligence were only viewed as factors of worth and respectability for men, while appearance was most important for women creating a double standard.

In her mediated reflections, Ussher’s displays how regular citizens understood the imperial message and British social standards surrounding gender. As demonstrated, Ussher set respectability and appearance standards based on her lived experience in the United Kingdom and the perceptions of other white British persons in India. These British Imperial standards differ regarding gender. For women, Ussher’s letters display the importance of maintaining a modestly, well-kept appearance, but not overly well-kept, marriage, wifely duties, and manners. For men’s respectability, personality and intelligence hold more importance than maintaining a well-kept appearance. These mentions display Ussher’s desire to appear respectable in the eyes of her family, and her British colleagues through her practice of the imperial message and British social standards.

### **Conclusions and Future Study**

Ussher presents herself as a respectable woman demonstrating how regular citizens, without specific motivations to promote the empire, understand and promote the imperial message and British social standards in their daily lives through the themes of race, apparel, and

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113. Marjorie Ussher to Mom, Dad, and Florence, MSS Eur D859.7 3436, 7 August 1940, Papers of Marjorie Ussher.

gender. By employing history, literature, and aesthetics lenses, this thesis unpacked the concept of respectability as understood by Marjorie Ussher in 1900s British India.

Following traditional gender roles, identities, and white British standards, Marjorie Ussher's letters outline a strict definition of respectable beauty and aesthetics. As discovered through a careful analysis of Ussher's letters, Ussher strives to portray herself as respectable, both personally and in her interpretation of and interactions with others. Following the white British public perception of what it means to be a likable, attractive, and well-mannered woman in the 20th century British Empire, Ussher succeeds in presenting herself as a white, respectable British woman to her social circle and family back in Ireland. Identification with the British aesthetic and economic norms stems from a desire to align with the upper class more affluent British population versus the lower class more impoverished Irish community.

As seen through the letters, Ussher understands and practices the imperial message and British social standards for respectability as they relate to the themes of race, apparel, and gender. In 1934-1940 India, Ussher, and other white British persons living in this context, held white and fair-skinned people in high regard. This way of thinking created a race-based understanding of respectability. Ussher racializes those who do not follow the same standards in her performance of social etiquette. Apparel also factors into people's respectability in Ussher's letters. Aesthetic criteria specified in the correspondence include specific types of clothing and colors, modern, cleanliness, and demonstrating a wealthy appearance. By adhering to these standards, the wearer can appear more respectable in the eyes of their peers. Finally, Ussher's letters make frequent gender-divided references to people's appearance and manners as a function of their respectability. Ussher's letters establish a clear focus on women's beauty, indicating heightened standards for women's appearance and respectability in British India. As

asserted, these standards for women include looking well-kept, but not overly so, and acting according to societal norms and expectations.

While Marjorie Ussher presents a critical perspective in the broader discussion of respectability and beauty in 1900s British India, it is essential to investigate how the understanding of these themes differs from people of other intersecting identities. An analysis of respectability and beauty in different places and times may also prove beneficial to understanding how values and norms shift over time and place. Other potential areas for research include an ecofeminist analysis of Ussher's time in India, for which the letters provide extensive support. And a gendered analysis of social, societal, and occupational roles during the Raj as seen through Ussher's letters. Despite the extensive research conducted on this thesis, there will always be other questions, directions, and areas for further study.

Due to the limited inclusion of women in the historical field, particularly of non-famous or non-wealthy persons, it remains crucial to find and tell their stories. This necessity rings particularly true when, like Ussher, knowledge of their story expands our awareness of the thoughts, actions, and motivating factors of regular people. As we can see through Ussher's reflections on and actions regarding respectability, ordinary people understood and disseminated the imperial message and British social standards in their daily lives. While the examples drawn upon, such as that of Mrs. Mae, appear mostly harmless, they demonstrate how deeply engrained British imperial values and beliefs around respectability were both to the colonizers and the colonized.

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