The Fictional Women of 1857: Re-Imagining the Revolt

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The sepoy mutiny of 1857. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

As part of the Anglophone world, India saw only a part of the literature produced in response to the Indian Rebellion of 1857. One of the more interesting works was the *Nena-Sahib, ou l'Insurrection des Indes* or *Nana Sahib or the Indian Insurrection,* written by Antoinette Henriette Clémence Robert in 1857. It was published as a serialised story in the French

newspaper *L'Estafette.* It is interesting, more for its treatment of women in an imagined India, than the historical facts it uses as a backdrop.

The first and the most valiant of the women in the novel is Ebora, whose sole aim in life is to help Nana Sahib. She is radiant and beautiful, yet terrible. She is a devoted servant of Nana Sahib and extricates her master from all kinds of trouble. She is an accomplished horse rider and is ready to kill if need be. Having lost her parents to the British extermination of the inhabitants of the village of Linapur, all Ebora desires is liberty from the British rule.

Nana Sahib. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

When she first sees Nana Sahib, she puts one hand on her chest and holds the other out to him to signify, "Yours, for life." She is

then by his side – dressed in men's clothes – to defend him, spy for him and for anything else that he needs.

There is one instance where four Indians plan to assassinate him. They sneak into the room where he is sleeping, with his arms left in the outer room. Waking defenceless, Nana Sahib confronts his attackers and is saved by Ebora, who enters, pistol in hand to dispatch one of the assassins. Another dies in a sword fight. Then, in comes Candor, a tiger faithful to Nana Sahib, to help finish the job.

If Ebora is motivated by revenge and nationalism, the very beautiful and much-in-demand Vasimore is another thing altogether. She is a *bayadère* (dancing girl) who is extremely successful and wealthy, but her solitary desire of living with Nana Sahib, either as his wife or mistress (the novel does not state this clearly), hits a wall.

After having declared her love for him, Vasimore cajoles him by saying that in her profession she meets many influential and important people and she could introduce him to the English governor and create an opportunity for his men to capture the Englishman. She boasts that she could get him information from Agra, from Kanpur, from wherever he wanted as she had access to many of the rulers' secrets.

Nana Sahib will have none of this, "You want to help me by betraying men who trust you?" he asks. What you are proposing is not just betrayal, it is betrayal coupled with theft!" Rejected and infuriated, she decides she will break him. Her plots, however, fail, and after two failed attempts at killing him, she commits suicide in the midst of a dance performance in front of a large

gathering that is organised in honour of Nana Sahib for his untiring efforts against the British. It is only after writing about her death that Robert finally reveals Vasimore's age to the readers – all of 20 years.

These details, based on the European stereotypes of the Indian nautch-girl, blend with journalistic representations to create what Robert was well known for: highlighting the role of an independent woman, which in this case is in the garb of a political narrative. Linking a *baydère* to Nana Sahib can be termed, in the language of Noam Chomsky, "false reality tailor-made for the masses." This "false reality" would inspire the 19th century women and encourage them to be more proactive in their lives.

Robert's fictional Nana Sahib is not all duty and honour. His heart is turned by a certain Margaret O'Sullivan, daughter of an English colonel, Lord O'Sullivan.

Lord O' Sullivan apparently agrees to give his daughter's hand to the Indian rebel, but she dies at the early age of 19. Her tomb is the only thing that brings tears to the eyes of the lion-hearted Nana Sahib. Just about half a page is dedicated to her, clearly indicating Robert's interests in depicting fighters over romance.

Not all the women, however, are on Nana Sahib's side. The young and beautiful Sarah Stugart, the daughter of Lord Stugart, an English general, hates India and Indians. That does not, however, prevent her from enjoying life in India as a colonial overlord. She is rich and collects fans studded with pearls and diamonds and even with rare sea plants. The fact that divers spent hours underwater to be able to get some of those plants for her is of no consequence to her. According to her, Indians had no feelings or sentiments and

were therefore none the worse for such strenuous tasks.

Sarah claims that unlike some English women she knew, there was no language barrier for her when she needed to communicate with her Indian maids. If they did not understand her command, all she had to do was prick them with her beautiful pearl-studded needles that held her hair together and they immediately understood.

Sarah is later imprisoned by Indians. Although she manages to escape after several months, she never regains her health. Having left her house one day for a short walk and feeling very tired, she halts near a house and dies quietly lying on green grass next to a waterfall.

It is rumoured that a few Indians found her corpse, decapitated her and offered her head to the nearby Sita temple. This is where her father, Lord Stugart, found her head. The rumour – true or not – that Indians had killed the general's daughter quickly spreads in the English camp.

That becomes the trigger for the English soldiers to seek revenge and inflict extreme cruelty on Indians. Sarah, according to Robert's testimony, is thus the catalyst for British assault on Indians, which then leads to the Indian Rebellion of 1857. It is a starkly different telling than the issuing of cartridges smeared with pork and beef tallow (although that is mentioned in the novel) and indirectly attributes the beginnings of the insurrection to a woman.

After the description of these fictitious women, Robert then highlights the independence and courage of the historical Malika Kishwar, the mother of Wajid Ali Shah, who is well known for her determination to help her son. She goes to England in hopes of

convincing Queen Victoria to free her imprisoned son and to reinstate him as the ruler of his small kingdom. The Queen, however, refuses her an audience.

Many Indians in the nineteenth century frowned upon journeys to distant lands, especially those across a sea or ocean. This embargo applied to men and women alike. This, however, did not deter Kishwar, for whom justice was of primordial importance and who would stop at nothing to obtain what she thought to be right.

In Robert's writings, feminine values are shown to somewhat undermine the masculine systems that contain them. Nana Sahib is saved by Ebora. Would the course of Indian history be different had he accepted Vasimore's proposition? The death of a British general's beautiful daughter incites entire British battalions (of men, of course) to maltreat Indians; and Kishwar goes to London in an attempt to save her son.

I would call Robert's novel gynocritic, one where she attempts to develop new models based on her experience of freeing herself and other women from the domination of men over women. She lived, after all, in an era where the French emperor Napoleon proclaimed that he did not like women who meddled in politics or those who wrote and that nature had intended for them to be at home as slaves to their husbands.

At least in her historical fiction, Robert could demonstrate that in the far away, imagined India, women were freer, fiercer and at the centre of all great affairs.

Nena-Sahib, ou l'Insurrection des Indes *was published as a serialised story in the French newspaper* L'Estafette *and is not available in print.*