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LOUISE H. KIDDER

DEPENDENTS IN THE MASTER'S HOUSE

When Rock Dulls Scissors

. . . the dominant person isn't always the least dependent one. *(Albert Memmi, Dependence, 1984, 8)*

ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS

The children's game in which two players simultaneously toss their hands to signal rock, paper, or scissors is played in several languages and cultures. The winner is the person whose choice can "cover" or "dull" or "cut" the other person's. The relationships among the elements do not follow the linear logic that says if A is greater than B and B is greater than C, then A must be greater than C. If the relationships were linear, rock would always win, but the rules state that scissors cut paper, paper covers rock, and rock dulls scissors. The hierarchy shifts with the context and forms a circle; the relationships loop around.

Other images with circular properties appear in some M. C. Escher drawings. In one picture you can follow a staircase with your finger and think you are going down the steps only to find out that the "bottom" is at the same level where you began, back at the "top." I use these examples not

to say that winning or being on top is only a game or illusion but to describe relationships that are nonlinear. In Escher's world what goes "down" comes back "up" and in Rock, Paper, Scissors, each element can damage the other.

The relationships between Western expatriates in India and the people they employ as servants also do not lie simply on an axis of domination and subjection. It has taken me a long time to see this and not fear I would minimize the injustice or injuries of colonial privilege by saying so (cf. Kidder 1996). The problems in the "master's" house involve more than domination and subjection, because the hierarchy is not simply linear. The servant's knowledge and the master's ignorance, the servant's mastery and the master's dependence, complicate the picture and contradict colonial assumptions of worth.

There is no single meaning attached to employing servants that applies to all times and places. And there is no unitary relationship between servants and employers. In eighteenth-century France, for instance, aristocratic families employed "man-servants" not only to provide services but also to be symbols of conspicuous consumption (Maza 1983). Men's wages were twice women's, so the more men a family had on display as doormen, valets, pages, cooks, and butlers the more status the family gained. The relationship between masters and their man-servants was "a triangular relationship involving masters, servants, and the public" (Hansen 1991, 48). Expatriates' relationships with servants in India have other meanings because they are in a different context. Expatriates in India today depend on servants not for a public display of status but for private assistance. Being dependent on servants—to purchase groceries, prepare meals, turn on hot water heaters, drive and repair cars, and translate Indian languages and cultures—is a problem that expatriates discuss among themselves. Foreign currencies make Westerners economically dominant, but for daily living they are very dependent on Indian "help."

I experienced the paradoxical relationship of being simultaneously dominant and dependent in 1964 when I had just received my B.A. degree in psychology and went to teach English in a women's college in south India. My outsider status had two edges. As a Westerner I always had access to dollars in a country where such foreign currency could not be bought. My income was modest by American standards (less than $100 per month), but it placed me on a par with Indian professors, and my housing allowance was generous. Two of us (my husband and I) rented an apartment that would house an Indian family of six. And for a very small sum my husband and I hired a man and woman to serve us as cook, laundress, water carrier, grocery buyer, and translaters for transactions we could not understand. We were economically dominant and personally dependent on two people we hardly knew.

In 1970 we returned to India and I decided to study how expatriates (primarily Americans and smaller numbers of Britishers, Germans, Scandinavians, and other Europeans) learned to live in India, with and without Indian servants. This essay explores aspects of relationships between expatriates and their servants that I have hitherto ignored.

The British colonization of India until 1947 and the subsequent economic domination by North America and Europe create the context for research even today. Colonialism has a long half-life and white Westerners who land in India still assume privileges of the "masters" who preceded them (cf. Kidder 1996). Caste and class within Indian society also shape the roles of Indian "masters" and "servants," so these are not uniquely colonial inventions (cf. Dickey 1995). What distinguishes the relationships of expatriate masters and Indian servants, however, is the expatriates' outsider status and postcolonial privilege. Expatriates have far more purchasing power and far less knowledge and skill for living in India than they would back home. This imbalance between living skills and purchasing power creates special problems in the expatriate's house. The hierarchy of domination and subordination is based on expatriates' money and privilege, but the master's nearly total dependence on servants disrupts the linear order. Who has control shifts with the context, and the relationships loop around to form a circle.

Loops occur in other relations of domination and subordination where two parties alternate being dependent on one another. Jean Baker Miller examines patterns of domination and subordination between husbands and wives and writes that "subordinates . . . know much more about the dominants than vice versa . . . and often know more about the dominants than they know about themselves" (1976, 10–11). Knowing more about oneself and the other is an adaptive survival strategy for someone who is subordinate, and it can also be used to subvert the hierarchy. Joy Charlton (1983) writes about how secretaries have access to information and acquire discretionary powers that rival those of their bosses but never appear in their job descriptions. And in Japanese there is a term for men who are "petty tyrants" because they berate and belittle their wives in public but obey them in private. If many relations of domination and subordination have a built-in paradox whereby the dominant person depends on the subordinate, what is unique about expatriate masters and domestic servants is that the nonlinearity is at times very pronounced. The loop is large when expatriates try to protect their health and well-being. The question of who is in control can be hard to answer.

COMPATRIOT EMPLOYERS AND DOMESTIC WORKERS

Among Indian employers of domestic servants there is little ambiguity about who is in control. Indian employers and domestic workers have more nearly linear relationships (Dickey 1995). The servants who help cook or clean house do not know any more about Indian culture than their Indian employers. They do not serve as translators or interpreters for their employers. And anything servants say or write in their own language, if overheard or seen, can be understood by their Indian employers. The employers rely on their servants for labor but not for superior knowledge of the society and culture in which they live. Indian employers feel vulnerable to transgressions of class lines, and they worry about servants carrying dirt or disease into the home and stealing the family's valuables or secrets (Dickey 1995). But they do not depend on their servants to be the cultural mediators, interpreters, or experts on daily life. The hierarchy is linear and rarely reversible.

Relationships in the United States between domestic workers and employers are similarly linear and nonreversible (Rollins 1985). The white women whom Judith Rollins observed expected domestic workers to make a show of being inferior. The employers hired servants to perform jobs the employers would not perform rather than jobs they *could not* perform. The domestic workers' unequal status was a job requisite. Employers expected the women they hired to act as though they also believed themselves to be inferior to confirm the hierarchy. Shellee Colen (1989) interviewed West Indian domestic workers in New York City who described similar demands. Women who had been teachers and nurses in the West Indies discovered they had to act "maidish" to please their employers in New York (Colen 1989, 175). The penalties for not enacting a lowly status could mean loss of their jobs and their green cards because many domestic workers' immigration status depended on their sponsors.

Women from Sri Lanka working as domestic servants in Saudi Arabia are in double (or triple) jeopardy. As outsiders in their employers' land, they depend on their employers for visas. Many women arrive with large debts owed to an entrepreneur who provided transportation and found them jobs. Some women endure physical and sexual abuse to maintain their jobs and immigration status (cf. documentary film, *Birds of Passage*). These women are caught in the snare of indentured servitude (see also Gamburd, this volume).

EXPATRIATES AND ASYMMETRICAL DEPENDENCIES

The Westerners I interviewed were ill-equipped and inept in varying degrees at managing the practical necessities of living in India. They were outsiders, and their domestic workers knew much more than they about the social customs and practical details. Before 1947 we would have called them colonizers (Memmi 1967); in this postcolonial time I call them expatriates. They included missionaries, foreign aid workers, foreign government officials, businesspeople, Peace Corps volunteers, students, and researchers.

Relationships between the expatriate employers and Indian servants they employed were asymmetrical in several ways:

- Expatriates had money.
- Indian servants had skills and knowledge for daily living.
- Expatriates depended on servants for food, water, hygiene.
- Servants depended on expatriates for a livelihood.
- The expatriate was the boss but was helpless in an Indian kitchen or marketplace.
- The servant was the subordinate but was more competent in the house and the marketplace.

Servants had a "homeland" advantage working in their own culture and language. Even unschooled servants knew much more about living in India than did their employers. They could speak, most could read, and many could write the local language better than their employers. And they knew all about the mundane matters that Indian nationals take for granted: how to shop for household provisions, where to buy meat and produce, how to cook in an Indian-style kitchen, from whom to order fresh milk, where to pay electric bills, how to supervise repair work, when to give alms, how to dispose of trash. These are a few of the hundreds of details foreigners found bewildering and frustrating. But, for a very small price, the foreigner could purchase the skills and knowledge of a servant to solve all these problems.

WHEN SERVANTS SEEM LIKE CHILDREN

Expatriates' relationships with servants was the topic of so many conversations that some expatriates complained about their friends who did nothing but "talk about servant problems" (Kidder 1996). Rather than acknowledge their own dependence, however, expatriates often complained about servants acting like children.

In a conversation about servants, one expatriate told about a fight between two servants who were a married couple. The expatriate family threatened to fire their cook because he had fought with his wife who also served in the house. Complaining about these adults fighting and threatening to fire one of them put the focus on the two unruly servants fighting like children. And like children they should be punished. However, had the

expatriates followed through with their threat, *they* would have suffered, too—they would lose the services of the person who provided food, water, and general maintenance of their kitchen. Describing the servants fighting like two children belies the expatriates' nearly childlike dependence.

In another expatriate's story a servant was described as childlike in his judgments and sentiments:

> D [expatriate man]: Well, we've sometimes wondered about Pimo.[1] I mean, we have to explain everything to him. You know, when we left the other day I told him not to let anyone into the house. And if anyone comes to look at the tape recorder, tell them to come back later when we're home. But I thought later, my god, I didn't tell him not to let any water buffaloes in! Or not to hang Alice [the family's infant daughter] up on the line! He really knew so little when he came to work for us. But then he gets so attached to any family he's working for that it's really complicated.

Indian employers also talk about domestic servants in ways that sound derogatory or paternalistic, but the context and therefore the meaning of their complaints are different (e.g., Dickey 1995). Indian nationals frequently provide lifetime employment to servants who begin working as "boys" or "girls" and continue through adulthood. Indian employers commonly provide medical care for a servant who has worked for the family and also extend care into the servant's old age. A servant who becomes "attached" to an Indian family acts rationally because he or she may have that job for life, or at least for a very long time, whereas a servant who becomes "attached" to an expatriate family is at a loss when that family leaves, until another expatriate family appears looking for domestic help.

"COMMUNICATION" PROBLEMS

"Communication" problems between domestic workers and expatriates are sometimes simply about language but can also be more complex than that. Misunderstandings have several plausible explanations. As a rule, domestic workers employed by expatriates specialize in working for foreign nationals. Indian servants who specialize in expatriates' services gradually learn the language (usually English) and culture of expatriates by working for numerous families in succession. Among their culinary specialties are making stone-ground peanut butter, homemade mayonnaise, cheesecake, chocolate brownies, and many other items that are not part of Indian cuisine. They know which shops and markets sell the foods and utensils needed for expatriates' kitchens. And they become familiar with the brands their employers prefer. Despite their experience in working for Westerners, however, "communication" is still not perfect. Miscommunication can arise about how to do a job or which brand name of an item to purchase. Neither of these is critical to an expatriate's ability to live or eat, but what seems unimportant to a disinterested observer is not trivial to the expatriate who feels thwarted.

> B [EXPATRIATE WOMAN]: I have a terrible communication problem with my cook—you wouldn't believe it. She bought me some cigarettes this morning, but I told her they were the wrong kind. So she just took them back [and didn't return with the right kind]!

The employer might have failed to specify the brand. The shop might not have had that brand. The cook might have misheard the name. And she could have intentionally come back empty-handed on her second try. Hiring other people to do one's work has the potential for "communication" problems built into every interaction, especially if one wants the other person to do it the "right" way. This "remote control" problem can occur between Indian employers and domestic employees, too, and the more control employers want over the outcome, the more vigilant they must be. Among expatriates there are many opportunities for the remote control to fail, particularly when they employ Indian workers to reproduce Western styles. In the following instance an expatriate ordered custom-built furniture and described the difficulty of monitoring the details.

> J [EXPATRIATE WOMAN]: You should have seen [S] trying to get this furniture made—it took over a year! And every day [S] would go down to the place where they made the furniture—they called it a factory! One day she took me along, and I watched her—she had to tell them each move.
>
> S [EXPATRIATE WOMAN]: I would stand there and tell them—"No, not that piece of veneer. I want this piece."

This telling of the story implies the workers could not be counted on to make good choices; the expatriate employers had to monitor each step if they wanted it done "right."

DO IT YOURSELF

When Indian employers discuss domestic "servant problems," they worry, as do expatriates, about hygiene and honesty. What makes the expatriates' stories different is the relative inability of the expatriate to perform the work

him- or herself. Expatriates are more dependent on domestic servants and Indian "help." In the following account from an Indian employer she describes theft as a ground for dismissal, but she does not sound less helpless (Dickey 1995, 6):

> And if she steals, of course, definitely . . . I wouldn't even think twice before firing her. I don't/I'm not scared of doing the house job myself. I mean, I make sure that she knows nobody is indispensable . . . you show them that you can do it yourself.

Few expatriates demonstrated that they could do it themselves. One American woman who worked in her own kitchen was considered remarkable:

J [expatriate woman]: The P's are a wonderful couple. They're really unusual, that's the only word for it. Especially H. She's the only American woman in town that I know of who does all her own cooking . . . and she goes to the market and all, and in addition she teaches every morning at this school.

She's just amazing, especially for [agency] people. Almost all of the other [agency] women I know do practically nothing—they really just sit at home and play solitaire and then complain that there's nothing to do.

Me: Do they get along with H?

J: Oh yes. Everyone just likes and admires H. And there's no bad feelings. Also, H never says to them, "Look, you're a trained nurse, why don't you go out into this village just once a week to do something." She just goes along doing her own things. And she's so unique that people admire her. You know, I think it must be that when you come here you get introduced to a certain group of people and maybe don't break out of that. And it seems that these [agency] women all get into the same circle and the same pattern and do nothing. But somehow H broke out of it. I don't know what it was.

Expatriates' success in maintaining good relations and retaining servants can be the difference between being happy or miserable in India. In field notes I described an expatriate woman as follows:

> She's a very soft-spoken woman, in early thirties, with a sixth grader and a one-year-old.
>
> She's very unhappy here—largely due to servant problems and the feeling that you can't trust anyone—this has been her experience. Her cooks have not kept the kitchen clean as she wanted and they've cheated her on money and by taking things.
>
> She says they were very disappointed with their experiences here—her husband gave up his job in the States because they were so sure they'd like it here and would want to stay for four years that he quit because he couldn't take more than two years leave of absence. Now they're going back after two years and he's got to find another job.
>
> She's doing her own cooking now because she still hasn't found another cook. She said on the phone to an American friend:
>
> Maybe they've put me on their black list, because I had a fellow who said he'd come work for me and he was supposed to come yesterday morning but he never showed up. . . .

Even an "old India hand," a missionary who lived in India sixteen years without "servant problems," suddenly faced such problems:

> Well, I'm doing my own cooking now. We never had any servant problems all sixteen years until just now. We had the same cook for ten years, but then he decided he didn't want to work in [this city] anymore. He wanted to go back to Madras—he's from there, he's not [from here]. So he started coming in to work drunk. Now I don't mind if he drinks outside, just as long as he comes to work sober, and on time. But one day he was really bad. He got his words all mixed up so I could hardly understand him and he started talking back to me. And then we noticed that some of our things were missing too. So we let him go. Then we've had one cook after another, but they all go after about a week.
>
> My husband lost all of his American nylon shirts! And I've lost some of my wedding silver and personal things like that. And what really made me unhappy was that my daughter Terry bought herself a pure silk saree with some Christmas money she had and that was taken!
>
> So I'm just doing all my own work now. I just have the gardener. But he helps me—he gets the vegetables ready and so I just have to cook them. And he helps me clean up.

Another expatriate woman who hired and fired many servants in succession greeted an Indian woman walking along the road with a "Hello," then turned and said to her son:

> Who's that? Is that one of the Mary's we've had? [She then turned to me and added:] I've hired and fired so many cleaners—sweepers—and they keep recognizing me but I can't keep track of them all!

The British company for whom this expatriate's husband worked provided their family with a sixteen-room bungalow that was a source of both comforts and fears:

> I haven't seen much else in India. It still is rather dirty. But we've got a nice place with [this company]. They give us a bungalow, you know. We have [to her son] what was it at the last count . . . sixteen rooms? I keep having nightmares that some morning I'll wake up and there'll be half of India in my courtyard! I mean, we've got enough space for ten persons and half the people here haven't got anywhere to live. Oh well.

She continued, describing additional comforts of the company housing:

> We also have a nice pool. . . . At first we were living on Residency Road. But that was no good for the kids. So we asked for a transfer to [this house]. [Here] they've got lots of playmates all in the compound. And they've got the pool just 15 yards from our house. So they're in the water most of the day!

Her family also had a car provided by the company and previously had a driver who not only chauffeured them but also maintained the car in good working condition. Now, without a driver the expatriate felt she could never be sure of reaching her destination:

> They give us these lousy little Standards here [Indian car]. But it gets me around. We had a driver before and he used to take care of it. But now I'm driving it myself and I never know if I'll get there! Well, what're you going to do?

GENDERED FIELDS

The employers/expatriates who told most of the stories about "servant problems" are women—wives and mothers. They were responsible for their family's meals and therefore responsible for the marketing and cooking performed by servants. The women of the expatriate households were the supervisors whose remote control of servants produced the breakfasts, lunches, and dinners. When family members became ill, however, the responsibility lay with the cook—for failing to boil the water, clean the food, or sterilize kitchen utensils. Some of the foods made for expatriate families are risky preparations—mayonnaise, stone-ground peanut butter, and raw

salads—and even under the watchful eye of an expatriate the raw eggs, peanuts, and salad greens can carry disease. An American woman who traced her husband's illness to the mayonnaise blamed the cook:

> We discovered that we were poisoning [my husband] right in our own kitchen . . . . he was eating sandwiches and I wasn't—and it must have been the mayonnaise that [the cook] was making—I don't know if it was a batch of bad eggs or what, but that was doing it—he was getting poisoned in our own house! (Kidder 1996)

The expatriate supervisors are usually women, but the cooks who work for Westerners are usually men (e.g., named Anthony or Andrew or Joseph or Jodi or Raj or Swamy). This gender reversal adds one more loop to the alchemy of dominance and subordination intertwined with dependence.

THE EQUITY QUESTIONS

Expatriates can afford to pay salaries to servants that far exceed the salaries Indian employers might pay. The differential not only "spoils" servants by an Indian employer's standards but also foregrounds the difference between expatriates' wealth and what their Indian friends have. Sometimes the difference between the purchasing power of Western expatriates and their Indian colleagues is so large that it threatens their presumably shared status. Expatriates who can pay domestic servants a salary close to civil servants' salaries compress the difference between working-class and middle-class Indians. And an act of "generosity" by a Western employer of domestic servants foregrounds the contrast between expatriates and Indian nationals. Ironically a simple act of "kindness" adds insult to the injuries of colonialism.

In social psychological research on social justice, a relationship between two people can appear "equitable" even if their rewards or outcomes are unequal. This form of equity is measured as the ratio of one person's "inputs" and "outcomes" in comparison with another person's inputs and outcomes (e.g., Lerner and Lerner 1981). By this formulation, the relationship between a person with a high level of skill who earns a high salary and a person with a low level of skill who earns a low salary is equitable provided their skill levels are proportionate to their income levels. What we see in the relationship between Western employers and Indian domestic workers is that "masters'" and "servants'" *skills for living in India* are *inversely* related to their salaries. Their lives describe not a null relationship but a negative correlation between *having skills for living* and *making a living* in India. Obviously other inputs account for the difference. We could add education and knowl-

edge of English and familiarity with science and technology as key components of the expatriates' inputs, but these are also skills and inputs that their Indian colleagues possess. An important ingredient for expatriates is simply being a Westerner. This is a significant "input" because the exchange rates for Western currency and the postcolonial legacy allow a person of modest means by North American or European standards to enjoy substantial privileges in India. The key ingredient is an accident of birth—having been born in countries that profited from colonial rule.

The "equity" of these relationships is distorted by the history of colonialism and its contemporary remnants just as interracial relationships in the United States are distorted by the history of slavery and lingering racism. Ralph Ellison (1947) wrote about these twists and tensions in the *Invisible Man* as his narrator mused about the responsibilities that lay with one old man in the basement of a paint factory:

> I wondered how an apparently uneducated old man could gain such a responsible job. He certainly didn't sound like an engineer; yet he alone was on duty . . . was the only one who knew the location of all of the water mains. (1947, 209)

When the narrator discovers how the paint is made he says, "But I thought the paint was made upstairs . . .," and Lucius Brocway explains:

> Naw, they just mixes in the color, make it look pretty. Right down here is where the real paint is made. Without what I do they couldn't do nothing, they be making bricks without straw. An' not only do I make up the base, I fixes the varnishes and lots of the oils too . . .
>
> A whole lots of folks wonders about that without gitting anywhere. But as I was saying, cain't a single doggone drop of paint move out of the factory lessen it comes through Lucius Brocway's hands." (Ellison 1947, 210)

Ellison's narrator discovered that the person in the basement could make or break the fortunes of the company by adding the right or wrong bases to the paint. His position was pivotal, but his status and compensation were minimal compared with the people who worked upstairs. The people upstairs reconciled the inequalities by "adding value" to their personal merits—by being white in a culture that has a history of white-skin privilege.

Relationships of domination and subordination are particularly vulnerable to subversion when the dominant person is dependent on the subordinate. The possibility of subversion makes the relationships nonlinear and unstable. Even simple errors or accidents—of omission or commission—disrupt the hierarchy. When an Indian cook puts untreated water in a Westerner's drink, the threat is invisible but the outcome is clear and predictable. When Ellison's Invisible Man mixed the paint, he could have brought down the company's fortunes.

CONCLUSIONS

I began this essay being wary of examining how masters were simultaneously dominant and dependent in the servants' land, fearing this analysis would sound like a pardon for colonial relations. Albert Memmi describes his initial reluctance to examine this:

> I had a tendency to try . . . to reduce everything to dominance and subjection. . . . I was painting a picture of oppression in order to condemn and combat it. Perhaps I had the impression, in spite of myself, that if I had introduced a third element into the opposition between dominance and subjection, I would have attenuated the responsibility of those who are dominant. I am quite willing to admit today that . . . I was full of passion, humiliation, resentment against injustice, and impatient hope for changes in the course of things and in my own life. (Memmi 1984, 7).

Examining how dependence interacts with domination and how together they shape colonial relationships seems as necessary as it is risky. Saying the hierarchies are nonlinear does not make them benign. They are oddly complex, as when scissors cuts paper, paper covers rock, and rock dulls scissors.

Notes

1. Names of persons referred to in the fieldwork have been changed to provide anonymity.

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