

The “Education” of the Indian Woman against the Backdrop of the Education of the European Woman in the Nineteenth-Century

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Abstract

The essay discusses the role and education of the women of India, with special reference to the women of Bengal during the nineteenth-century and a comparison is made between the education of the Indian woman and the education of the European woman during this era. The education of the Indian woman is also referenced against the backdrop of the nationalist movement in India against imperialist rule and its effects on the women of the country.

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The first rumblings of the nationalist movement in India during the latter part of the nineteenth century against the imperial rule began in the state of Bengal and with it came the "education" and identification of the Indian woman as purported by the Indian male/colonial master. Although the bulk of this essay examines the education of women in Bengal and the theory of the “Bhadramahila,” this is not to say that there was no education of women in the rest of India. I will also give examples of women in other states in India to complete the picture.

At any rate, the theory of Bhadramahila is noted in Partha Chatterjee’s essay, “Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized women: The Contest in India.” According to Chatterjee, the word “Bhadramahila” or respectable woman became one of importance to the nationalists in India when many girls' schools were opened in 1850 in the state of Bengal by English missionaries. At around the same time, Bengali activists such as Rammohun Roy and Bhudev Mukhopadhyay were writing books and tracts that supported the education of women, and both the British and the Indian men wrote and spoke against atrocities such as sati or widow immolation. During this time period, the definition of the term "Bhadramahila" was broadened from that of a respectable woman to that of a woman who had a western education from one of the missionary schools started by the English, but a woman who did not drink or smoke or kept the company of men. From the nationalists’ viewpoint, education and respectability in an Indian woman was required to help her retain the culture of her home/country from outside influences. Thus, despite the woman being educated, it was at the behest of the men who allowed minimal participation in, for example, rallies against the imperial administration. And when activists, such as Roy and Bhudev wrote about the emancipation of the Indian widow, she was always in the shadows. Through the above example and others from pre-colonial India, I will show how the Indian woman, "re-educated" herself despite, the "purdah" system, despite sati and despite identities pushed upon her by the male/colonial masters. I will use examples from the writings of

Indian women in the nineteenth-century to prove my point. I will also use pre-and post-colonial theories, and ideas from Hinduism, the message of the Indian goddess, and Indian customs (that were misinterpreted by Orientalist discourse) and culture to understand the importance of the education of the Indian woman against the backdrop of the education of the Western female during the watershed period of education and suffrage for women in the nineteenth-century in Europe.

The editors of the anthology titled, *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present* Tharu and Lalita, note the argument of economic historians who debate that the “Industrial Revolution in Britain which could not have occurred without the capital that became available from the plunder of India.”¹This plunder began after the battle of Plassey in 1757 when the British were able to divert the wealth from India to the home country. Coincidentally, the steam engine was patented in Britain in 1769, patents for carding, drawing and spinning machines in 1775, and in 1788, “the steam engine was applied to blast furnaces”²

In India on the other hand, land taxes were at their highest, and the exportation of Indian textiles, silk, iron, glass, paper, pottery and jewelry were taken over by British industries. The jobs now went to the industrial cities of Britain and both men and women in India were forced off their means of livelihood. Unfortunately, the women suffered more than the men because it was easier for the men to leave their homes and find jobs on the plantations and farms set up by their colonial masters, but the women had to stay at home to take care of the children and their households. But despite such “penury and misuse,” there were rebellions in many forms by women, such as the Munda Insurrection of 1899-1900 by the Adivasi tribe of Bengal, which, and others like it, dogged the imperial/nationalist masters throughout their reign in India.³

As the British continued making inroads into India’s social, economic and political arenas, they began anglicizing the country. One major way was through the education of the natives and what better way to do so, but through the weakest section of society—the women. As one notes in Oriental discourse, the natives in all the colonies needed “civilizing.” As one nineteenth century traveler in India notes, the Indian man forced his wife to revere him as a god, and to submit to his corporeal chastisements, whenever he chooses to inflict, by a cane or a rope in the back parts...”⁴ Such treatment coincided with Indian customs, such as widow burning or sati and allowed the British to push for reform in the 1850s against these atrocities. Many male Indian activists, such as Rammohun Roy helped the English with these reforms. Needless to say, this was good for the women of India, but in looking more closely at atrocities, such as widow burning, one does not see the forcing of women on to the funeral pyre of their husbands, on the one hand, and on the other, sati was not a problem for every village, town and city in India. But to return to the education of the colonized, high taxes and the de-industrialization of India was

¹ Susie Tharu and K. Lalita Eds. *Women Writing In India: 600 B.C. to Early 20th Century*. (New York: The Feminist Press, 1991), 146

² Ibid.,147

³ Ibid.,148

⁴ Partha Chatterjee. *Colonialism, Nationalism and the Colonized Woman: The Contest in India*. American Ethnologist. (Summer 1989) 622-33.

not considered as brutal as sati by the imperial masters, and of course, inroads were being made in the field of education. So, by the mid 1850s the London Missionary Society introduced Christian education in schools all over India, and especially in the state of Bengal in which 2238 schools were opened and many Bengali women were able to get high school diplomas during this time period. But one needs to be reminded of the “Bhadramahila” concept in which the woman had to retain her respectable behavior and had to refrain from “memsahib” like behavior. A “memsahib” was an Englishwoman who of course followed a western style of living, eating, drinking and smoking and keeping the company of men. An educated Indian/Bengali woman could not do these things because by doing so she would not only lose her identity but the identity of her country. The women of India were the holders of their country’s culture. Thus the Indian woman’s voice was doubly curbed by the colonial and the Indian males. So although the education of the Indian woman was highly propagated by Indian intellectuals and the colonizer, it came with a price.

The Indian male intellectuals/activists in India who encouraged reform and intellectual freedom for the Indian woman began their work in the state of Bengal. Some examples of the work of these men who are previously mentioned are examined by Ray Chaudhuri in his book *Europe Reconsidered*. One of them, Bhudev Mukhopadhyay was from the upper class Bengali Brahmin caste. Ray Chaudhuri shows how the former was totally against Indian consumerism incited by westernization. Bhudev emphasized “nivrittimarga,” which was “the path of renunciation implying abstinence and freedom from worldly desires.”⁵ Bhudev was against eating meat, and drinking whiskey. Among the Bengali elites, there was “the unhappy consequences of western education, “such as, western clothing, “a bastardized Bengali, liberally studded with English words, the attack on idolatry in Hinduism by activists, such as Rammohan Roy, the conversion of many upper class Bengalis, such as Michael Madhusudhan Dutt to Christianity, and a pseudo Hinduism propagated by the British by people such as colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky (1875) in the founding of the Theosophical Society. Bhudev was committed to the Hindu tradition. He believed in the joint family, using one’s mother tongue as a medium of instruction etc, but he was also influenced by Goethe and Victorianism and as Ray Chaudhuri notes, Bhudev’s “ Brahmin disciplinarianism had a hard Victorian patina.”⁶ These activists and educated men also propagated for the betterment of widows and disenfranchised women in their writings, but once again with a catch. In his book *Provincializing Europe* Dipesh Chakarborty examines the lives of widows through the writings of the Bengali intellectuals. Chakarborty looks at the writings of authors, such as Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Rammohun Roy who create protagonists (who are widows) involved in illicit love affairs, but whose love is pure or “pabitra.” One sees strands of this philosophy in nationalist history in India when viewing the conduct of women. The woman is still seen as being part of the domestic space, and that women can improve society only through their dharma (duty/a Hindu ideal). One

⁵ Tapan Ray Chadhuri. *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in 19th Century Bengal*. (New Delhi. Oxford University Press, 1998), 31

⁶ Ibid.,44-45

sees the ideals of Bengali patriarchy in the literature: “The archive of accounts of the widows’ suffering that these men helped to build did not include the widow’s own experience of it.”⁷ It was only when a woman writer, Kalyani Datta in 1991 who discovered how “the widow’s voice was the chief aim of her exercise.”⁸ Thus the Bengali male of nationalist India in keeping with the European idea of Enlightenment follows David Hume and Adam Smith’s theories of objectivity and universality of human nature instead of its subjectivity and interiority.”⁹

It was not only the male in the guise of the colonizer and the patriarchal Indian that the Indian woman had to contend with but also the European female who had a distorted view of her which is clearly stated in the writings of English women travelers in India. In her book, *Women Travellers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze*, Indira Ghose notes the sweeping generalizations made by European women about Indian women. These European women reflect many of the ideas of educated women in their country, such as Mary Wollstonecraft who analyzed at length the differences in Western and Eastern civilizations, in which the former is always held in contrast to the latter with references being made to the “barbarous Mohemetan or Chinese cultures.”¹⁰ The European women writers in the colonies were well versed in Orientalist discourse, which made India look “mythical, dreamlike and irrational.”¹¹ Many critics against such discourse like Chris Bagly point out that traditional Indian society was not “rigid.” It was British rule that codified many localized and pragmatic customs into a “unified Brahmanized Hindoo law.”¹¹ In this manner, it was easier to bring about sweeping reforms, which helped the British with the governance of the country. The woman travelers in India, such as Maud Diver (1917) thus helped with such codification in the further domestication of the Indian woman. Diver for example, shows the discourse on women and “the etiquette of their movements within and between public and/private space.”¹² There were guidebooks written by English women for better housekeeping in India. Ann Steel and Grace Gardiner’s book entitled *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (revised and reprinted a dozen times between 1888 and 1917) showed home making as an art. The philosophy was that in the empire there was a constant need for civilizing as the Englishwoman had to keep the native Indian woman under control in their domestic space. So these English women were replicating the empire in their homes.¹³ These women travelers construct a subjectivity that is always “constituted by the definition of the other.”¹⁴ Maria Graham yet another woman travel writer admires Hinduism but only in its “past

⁷ Dipesh Chakarbarty., *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 129

⁸ Ibid.,129

⁹ Ibid.,129

¹⁰ Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. Eds. *Women Writing In India: 600 B.C. to the Early 20th Century*. (New York: The Feminist Press, 1991), 159

¹¹ Indira Ghose. *Women Travellers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 33

¹² Ibid.,45

¹³ Ibid.,50

¹⁴ Ibid.,34

glory,” but when she encounters Hindu worship, “she is filled with revulsion.”¹⁵ Another travel writer, Marianne Postans is interested in Hindu festivals but notes, “Hindoo holidays interfere sadly with the labours of the working classes.”¹⁶ Such travel narratives by Englishwomen thus produced a “sense of subjectivity for women” and implied “the very notion of gender that the ideology of the bourgeois self is based on. Simultaneously, however, this ideology worked to contain women within gender norms and boundaries” and coincided with the nationalistic/imperialistic ideals.¹⁷ Thus in the guise of social reforms both by the colonizer (male and female) the colonized Indian male, the Indian woman was given an agenda in which to live her life.

In the case of the colonizer as seen in the thought processes of both the Englishman and Englishwoman, the Indian woman was being constructed as the ‘other.’ As noted earlier in the writings of English women travelers, all the Indian woman was capable of was to occupy a ‘domestic space’ either set by the ‘zenana’ or women’s quarters that women occupied as queens and wives of the Mogul kings and princes or the domestic maids of the colonized masters and mistresses. By the same token, the Indian male fighting for his freedom from the yoke of colonization demanded from the Indian female a relegation to the metaphorical/physical home despite her education because she had to retain the spirituality of the nation from westernization. In both cases, the Indian woman was stultified into a “progressive domestication,”¹⁸ and was metaphorically and physically under surveillance by eastern and western mores.

But if we examine the literature of the Indian woman written in the 19th and early 20th centuries, we see “radical” and “subversive” movements in such writings which are muted yet revolutionary in their style¹⁹ One such example is Dhirubhen Patel’s story *Vishrambhakta* (Revelation: 1875). A young son and his mother are on a pilgrimage and the mother stops much to the chagrin of her son to chat with her friend. These two women have not met in many years and when she introduces her son to her friend the friend notes that the son does not resemble his father Vinayak. The mother then much to the horror of her son calmly states: “I was never married to his father.”²⁰ The son is shattered by his mother’s revelation. Here was his mother who cooked and cleaned for her family her entire life; she was a spiritual woman on her way to a pilgrimage; she was devoted to her family. The reader too is “overwhelmed by the new awareness of the hidden reserves this ‘ordinary’ ‘conservative’ housewife and mother held.”²¹

It is interesting to note that in India it was not just the middle/upper-class women who were educated in the 19th century in missionary schools, but there were also Indian women in the

¹⁵ Ibid.,34

¹⁶ Ibid.,35

¹⁷ Ibid.,33

¹⁸ Ibid.,33

¹⁹ Susie Tharu and K.Lalita, Eds. *Women Writing in India: 600B.C. to Early 20th Century* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1991), 186

²⁰ Ibid.,186

²¹ Ibid.,186

lower classes who were self-taught. A good example is that of an “unpopular” group of women who managed to flourish during the nineteenth-century in the state of Bengal. This group was the “kabiyaal.” (1820-1830). One famous woman in such a group was Jogeshwari.. Kabiyaals toured the countryside and performed poetic duels or “Kabigan,” which translates into poem/song. These groups usually had rich patrons who sponsored them. Most of the poetic duels were done by men and so when women began performing they were not considered to be popular. The poems were bawdy and satirical and many nineteenth-century Indian male reformers felt that such poems were not suitable for middle-class women.²² But these songs or poems reflected the lives of the poor disenfranchised women and subverted the Hindu culture to an extent.

Within the middle-class Bengali family or any middle-class Indian family during the nineteenth-century when women began receiving an education, many stories were being written by women who were able to show how they were, despite, the “modernization” of their lives through education, unable truly to have a voice that carried any weight in their day to day living. One such writer was Rassundari Devi (1810-?) who wrote her autobiography, *Amar Jiban* (my life). This was an astounding achievement for a woman, because it was the first autobiography to be written in Bengali, (1876) which was written two decades before the very famous male “litterateur” Debendranath Tagore published his autobiography in 1898.²³ By the male critics of that time, Rassundari’s work is referred to as being “curious” because it was written by a woman. According to Tharu and Lalita, Rassundari’s work, “was a major event for modern Bengali prose, which was still in an incipient stage.”²⁴ Although the autobiography is merely a story about the life of an ordinary Indian housewife, one sees rebellion and struggle in “understated” ways. Rassundari taught herself to read and write to “escape the grind of petty domesticity” and she asks: “Just because I am a woman does it necessarily mean that trying to educate myself is a crime”? She also brings to the forefront the life of a widow because she became one when her husband died in 1869. She sadly notes: “Toward the end of my life I have been widowed. I feel ashamed and hurt by the realization that even if a woman has lived her life fully, has brought up her children and leaves behind her sons and daughters to carry on, her widowhood is still considered a misfortune.”²⁵ Here is reflected what Chakarborty notes in his criticism of the treatment of widows by Indian society despite activism against their treatment in the reform movements of the nineteenth-century. In his book *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakarborty notes, the widows of India were always helped from the outside. “The archive of accounts of the widows’ suffering” shows that the Indian activists, such as Vidyasagar and Rammohun Roy helped to build “did not include the widows’ own experience of it.”²⁶

²² Ibid.,187

²³ Ibid.,190

²⁴ Ibid.,190

²⁵ Ibid.,191

²⁶ Dipesh Chakarborty. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 129

Yet another woman writer, Savitribai Phule (1827-1890) was a poet, activist and scholar from the western Indian state of Maharashtra. She and her husband Jotiba Phule began many movements for the lower caste people against their upper caste oppressors. Some of these movements included opening schools for the low or untouchable castes, settling land disputes and allowing for equal treatment between the upper and lower castes, such as drawing water from the same wells. Savitribai was also “the first woman teacher in modern Maharashtra and she started the first school for women in 1848. Here a school for women was not started by the missionaries. Many of Savitribai’s poetry and letters educated women and Indian society about the problems that women had to suffer in their everyday lives. We see true stories in her letters about caste conflicts for example when an upper caste Brahmin boy falls in love with an untouchable caste girl. When the girl gets pregnant, both she and her lover are almost killed by the villagers, but Savitribai rescues them from their plight. Many of Savitribai’s poems published in 1854 (Kavyaphule, {poetry’s blossoms}) (Bavankashi Subodharatnakar {Ocean of Gems}) speaks about “the wealth that comes with education.”²⁷ Savitribai’s “correspondences and insights into her life and into women’s experiences in one of the most important social movements of the times” (fighting the caste wars) and depicts the successes of some of the women writers of India.²⁸

Because of the exotic way in which Orientalist discourse depicted the Indian woman, especially in the nineteenth- century when the colonizer began taking an active role in reforming and governing India, Indian women have been noted as being passive, hidden behind the veil or purdah, victimized by atrocities such as sati and the domestication of the woman like cattle, actually led the Indian woman to search for “civil, political, and religious rights straight from the belly of the great religious and social reform movements of the nineteenth- century.”²⁹ Time and time again in all parts of India whether the women were in purdah, or widows, or housewives without much of a voice, we see recorded stories of female agency as these same women “asserted their rights, addressed social inequalities, and rejected or adapted tradition in an engagement with the world around them in what amounted to Indian feminism.”³⁰ We hear about women contesting divorce in western India in the 1880s, we hear about organizations, such as those of Savitribai to improve the lives of the lower caste. We hear about stories written by widows, such as, Rassundari Devi, which helped improve the lives of widows, and when we examine vernacular plays, poems, folk literature, such as those of Jogeshwari, “a considerable body of literature can be amassed to present a case for the emergence of feminism” and the growth of education for the women of India.³¹

²⁷ Susie Tharu and K. Lalita. Eds. *Women Writing in India: 600B.C. to Early 20th Century*. (New York: The Feminist Press, 1991), 211-212

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 212

²⁹ Padma Angol. *The Emergence of Feminism in India 1850-1920* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 9

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10

³¹ *Ibid.*, 15

On the other hand, in nineteenth-century Europe, there is a difference in the education process of the women as noted in the literature of European women. In her book, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, Rachel Du Plessis Blau notes that the endings in women's novels of the nineteenth century either depicted marriage or death. We don't see woman to woman bonds, Rachel Blau says that the quest for women in the nineteenth-century were finite. Blau reiterates the novels of Brontë and Austen where "both quest and marriage plots form the basis of their works."³² Women are shown to marry men who are so much better than they are or the man is converted by the female and the improvement of the man becomes the woman's foremost occupation.³³ Again, a woman is given a place whether in death or in marriage, which is similar to the inner space that the Indian woman is also given by the colonizer/European woman. It is interesting to see that the European women's travel writings in India, as Indira Ghose notes, used "Orientalism as a strategy to negotiate a form of gender power and to contest male dominance in scientific and scholarly modes of writing." The European women travelers did this by constructing a subjectivity that was always "constituted by the definition of the other," which is the Indian woman.³⁴ The examples of such are seen earlier in the essay.

In conclusion, despite the "education" of the respectable Indian woman, she was able to on many occasions defy her stance by rebelling in understated ways through her writing and through her movement between her inner and outer space created for her by Indian patriarchal and British colonial structures. Although at times, her struggle was a lonely one, there was hope for her to regain a respectability that was independent from her male perpetrators.

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³² Rachel Du Plessis Blau. *Writing Beyond the Ending*. (Bloomington: Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1985), 9

³³ Ibid.,10

³⁴ Ibid.,34

Ray Chaudhuri, Tapan. *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth-Century Bengal*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

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