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## Voices of Dissent: A Study of Feminist Texts of Colonial India

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### Abstract

Women emancipation was foremost in the agenda of reformist movement in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The normative image of high caste Aryan woman was created as a result of the interaction of the feminist movement with nationalist discourse and forced the women to live up to the constructed ideals of womanhood.

As a rebuttal to the assumed submissiveness of early Indian feminism, I have cited the works of Tarabai Shinde (*Stri-Purush Tulana* [A Comparison between Women and Men], 1882), Pandita Ramabai (*The High Caste Hindu Woman*, 1886) and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (*Istrijatir Abanati* [Women's Downfall], 1905). They reflect intellectual feminist voices sensitive to the patriarchal manoeuvrings, voicing fearlessly their views on gender equality and contributing to an alternate discourse. Bringing in the cross textual references and 'micro-narratives', the study would question the male hegemony, while highlighting the need for the re-appraisal of marginalized body of literature that existed in colonial India.

### Keywords

Early Indian feminism, nationalism, reform movements, motherhood, patriarchy.

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Indian feminism as we perceive today with all its multiplicity and dynamism took birth in the social reform movements of colonial India. Notwithstanding the presence of feminists like Sarala Debi Chaudhurani, Pandita Ramabai, Sarojini Naidu, etc., the early phase of the indigenous feminism is generally stamped as acquiescent and passive. It is said that women activists displayed a lack of feminist consciousness and followed the precepts of men. (Krishnamurty ix) However the recent post-modernist stance is questioning this assumed passivity of feminism.

Notwithstanding the abundance of scholarly production on women's history of India, there has been a lack of adequate studies into the various facets of the movement. The major portion of the literature on the subject, for instance is simplistically reductive ignoring the 'debates about the nature, tactics and strategy of campaigns.' (Kumar 1) Besides the study of the rise of Indian feminism seems unduly Bengal-centric focussing the lives and activities of Bengali 'bhadramahila' (which itself was a bourgeois construction of a high caste Bengali woman). Besides looking at the problem only in the context of reconstruction of patriarchy strays our attention from attending to any autonomous attempts made by women to assert themselves. (Anagol 4-5)

The recent studies into this field indicate the reductive conclusions drawn from this simplistically reductive model of feminist awakening in India. The notion of passivity of feminist movement may be attributed to the Foucauldian silencing of autonomous voices by the patriarchal ideology with which the former did not comply with. The reform movements that engineered the feminist movements were not in themselves merely a result of reformative zeal of reformers. Rather it was taken up in a wake of changing socio-political circumstances in colonized India.

The British rule had justified its moral superiority over its Indian subjects on the grounds of degeneration of Hindu civilization apparent in the low status of

Indian women as propagated by imperialist scholars like James Mill, Duff, Grant, etc. As the former puts forth in his book:

The condition of woman is one of the most remarkable circumstances in the manners ... Among rude people women are generally degraded, among civilized people they are exalted. (Mill and Wilson 295)

Thus the growing population of western educated Indians found that to claim their right to authority they need to counter these imperialist charges by reinterpreting their history and reforming the society and justify their inherent virtue. Accordingly the Indian reformers took the clue from the yet another version of Indian history propagated by the orientalist scholars namely Collerbrooke, Jones and most popularly Max Muller who showed Indian past as the golden Aryan age (Chakravarti 31). This version of Indian past was utilized by Indians to reconstruct their nationalist discourse. 'A powerful new female figure emerged in the nationalist imagination..' who was 'in keeping with the now- naturalized Victorian ideals of domestic virtue, patient and long suffering... a stern custodian of nation's moral life' (Tharu and Lalita 172).

The rhetoric of Aryan woman created a trap for those not fitting in this stereotype image. This 'trend of glorifying women', 'placed an enormous burden on women' to conform to the norms being laid by this reconstituted patriarchy (Tharu 263). Women were expected to welcome such precepts and those deviating were eventually marginalized. This resulted in the widespread attitude amongst scholars to view Indian women as internalizing 'the offered models' by the reformers which always was keeping in with the distinction between private and public domain with women kept to the former (Anagol 6). They were deemed as making no efforts 'to distinguish the functions of their representations of Indian womanhood from that of nationalist and religious revivalist.' This gradual fading of the women's question with the nationalist agenda gaining momentum, Partha Chatterjee says, was due to the assimilation of the latter with the former. The nationalist resolution derived strength from the rhetoric of motherhood and

conferred on women the 'honour of a new social responsibility' expecting them to live up to the glorified image of motherhood for the cause of sovereign nationhood, thus trapping them in a 'new, and yet entirely legitimate subordination' (Chatterjee 245).

The reductive simplicity of feminist discourse as a result of this limiting image of ideal Aryan woman excluding all other verities, gives a homogeneous picture of the past. The recent scholars advocate the retrieval of 'micro-narratives' that tend to be ignored by the dominant epistemological framework. Thus in the post-structuralist spirit moving away from the dominant patriarchal ideology, the present paper takes up three feminist writings from colonial India that were either ignored or criticized by the then society for being grossly deviant from the normative standards. Chronologically listing, they are: Tarabai Shinde's *Stri Purush Tulana (A Comparison between Women and Men)* (1882) in Marathi, Pandita Ramabai's *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1886) in English and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 'Istrijatir Abanati' (Women's Downfall) (1905) in Bengali. The writings composed in different languages by authors of different socio-cultural backgrounds match indisputably in their conviction over the deeply ingrained patriarchal oppression of Indian women in the name of religion, caste, custom, etc. and the need of female education to change this.

*Stri Purush Tulana*, the only work published by Tarabai Shinde, with the unfavourable reviews it attracted were left unknown till republished in 1975. Written in a 'rough and harsh manner', as she makes it clear in the introduction itself, the treatise is regarded as one of the earliest feminist texts in India (Tharu and Lalita 222). Tarabai Shinde, an active member of Satyashodak Samaj wrote it to vindicate women of the charges hurled on them in an article in Pune Vaibhav in 1881 in wake of a case of infanticide of her baby by a young Brahmin widow. The article which undertook to slight the whole womenfolk and present their negative image under the pretext of this incident instigated Shinde to write her polemic.

The work is unique in many ways. Shinde's work as her translator notes is "the first text...in western India at least, in which a woman addresses herself so squarely and polemically at the question of women's relations with men (O'Hanlon 8)". Being a seminal text in this genre, it raises various 'historical and political' questions about the power division between men and women and the issues like child marriage, widowhood, female education, etc. The critique of gender relation in such a disconcerting tone, quite uncommon for her times spared no male figure for their part in heaping atrocities on women, be it male reformers or even male Gods: "Because you men are all the same, all full of lies and dirty tricks (Shinde 77)". Questioning the double standards by patriarchal society towards women, she pointed out the conceits and vices of men, apparent in them of which they accuse the former. Though set up in a particular context, the work succeeds in questioning the logic for putting all the blame on women. Besides as the times had changed, so had the lives of people, which was more apparent in men and yet the women are ridiculed for getting westernized. Besides, the work is remarkable in raising the issue of caste based discrimination of women, something so central to the social fabric of India.

Shinde went on pointing each vice that men accuse women of to be in abundance in men themselves.

But haven't men got any of these faults themselves? Is it that women tell lies and men don't? What about stealing, whoring, murder, robbery, trickery, taking government money in bribes, making lies into truth and truth into lies – don't men do any of this? (Shinde 99)

The vices in women, Shinde confirms is trivial as compared to that of men and the former's vices is more a result of lack of education which again is a male contrivance. Even the greatest crime committed by women, adultery is a result of male's conceitful ways that deprive women of their conjugal rights through mismatched marriages and proscription of widow remarriage, ultimately leading to cases as the present. (Shinde 102)

Shinde spared no male authority as she believed all in complicity in women's subjugation. In an irrevocably disconcerting tone, she dismisses any pretence at the patriarchal goodwill at womenfolk, be it male reformers or even Gods: "Even your gods are crooked, so is it any wonder that you men are villains too?" (Shinde 115)

Citing the cases of Satyavati and Kunti who bore babies outside wedlock, she questions why such incidents when taking place in real life met with such harsh punishments. And she finds it unjust to accuse women for being invariably corrupt for the occurrence of cases of illegitimate children by widows as these too are in a way inflicted by male dominated society's cruel practices. For those who cite scriptures for the sanction of such practices, she pointed out the instances where the former is ignored, thus it would be a hypocrisy to cite the Shastras in the name of female propriety.

Shinde condemned the romanticized literature of her times that presented an unrealistic picture of women. She showed no faith in the zeal of male reformers whose efforts she deemed as nothing more than sham. Ironically she suggested that as compared to the ordeal of widowhood, it would be a better option for women to practise *sati* (burning of widows in the funeral pyre of their dead husbands). Accusing the contrivance of male Gods like Indra and Krishna over guileless women, she seemed waging war against each faction of patriarchy that made up the practice of *sati*, enforced widowhood and normative ideals of female morality. Shinde's directness at the question of gender identity along with the caste concerns are unique features considering her times and social milieu. And as O'Hanlon marks that despite the flaws and contradiction in her critique, it is still meaningful in the context of the changing political and cultural scenario (O'Hanlon 62).

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, too hailed from Maharashtra, but her work was written in English and much sober and objective in tone as it was directed at American readership and 'to intelligent, educated, happy American' women more specifically. To them she presented the plight of Indian women to which

the latter has been subjected in the name of custom and religion (Ramabai i). She left no doubt that Indian women had always lived a life of wretchedness at the hands of men. Unlike the ideal Aryan women concept she held that women were always invariably shown in negative light as 'impure as falsehood itself' by religion and various other social practices (Chakravaty 53).

In a dispassionate style, Ramabai delineates the condition of Hindu woman through various stages of her life. The utility of women in the society is perceived only up to their function of bearing sons. Consequently the birth of female child is undesirable but, Ramabai marks inevitable 'ill luck' do girl child bring into being and make them subject of torture for whole of their life. Here she discussed the practice of female infanticide among certain Rajput communities who could not tolerate polygamy like Kulin Brahmans and thus resorted to murdering their own female children. About latter, she wrote that women of such clans were married off unmindfully to raise their caste status albeit it meant depriving them of any conjugal lives.

Further Ramabai shed light over the violence and incompatibility in marital life for women who are married off to grooms in their advanced age when still a child. Even when there is no violence, there is no question of respect or freedom for women, '...they are generally well content to remain in bondage...' If the women were unfortunate to face widowhood, which was quite common with such huge age gaps between the spouses, the former was signed off to an endless perdition if she happened to escape *sati*. With her sound knowledge of Sanskrit, Ramabai pointed out the manipulation by Brahmans in the translation of the verse that sanctified the custom of *sati*. She too like Shinde, however points out the desirability of *sati* as compared with the harsh existence of widowhood.

Unveiling, the sordid realities of being born a woman in a Hindu society, Ramabai exposed the manoeuvrings of religion intent on supporting and perpetuating women's oppression. Religion, customs through devices like proverbs have created such an image of women who are deemed as creatures

unfit for any respect or compassion. Ramabai quotes many instances of such negative images through religious texts and proverbs and maxims. For example,

Through their passion for men, through their mutable temper, through their natural heartlessness, they become disloyal towards their husbands, however carefully guarded they may be in this world. Manu-ix, 14 (Ramabai 53)

Ramabai posits that women are maintained at this abject state by depriving them of knowledge so that their mental faculties remain undeveloped and she adds sarcastically that to counter such degradation of women in Hindu society, she proposed a plan that would include education for women and in particular for widows and opening shelter homes for them. In order to materialise it she implored her American readers to donate generously and she was not without success. Her work was warmly received in America however there was not much for approbation back home due to its candid expression of women's condition in Indian society contrary to the nationalist ideal womanhood proposition. On the contrary what Ramabai had to say was in disagreement even with liberals. Throughout she maintained that there never was any ideal age for Indian women as propounded by orientalist theory of Aryan age with women having deified status.

I beg of my western sisters not to be satisfied with...the outside beauties of the grand philosophies, and the interested discourses of educated men, but...enter into the dark cellar where they will see the real working of the philosophies...All is not poetry with us..." (Chakravarty 75-76)

She subverted the popular reformist theory and said that Indian women being invariably ill-treated have borne weaklings and thus that explained the destitute condition of colonized India. This was in exact opposition of nationalistic theories by reformers like Swami Dayananda Saraswati who talked of inherent goodness of Aryans being borne of virtuous mothers. To Ramabai,



there was no such illusion; she could not imagine any such utopia against the stark scriptural verdict on women and their present state in society.

“Strijatir Abanati”, a Bengali essay too is implicitly engaged in analysing means and methods of patriarchal oppression of Indian women. Begum Rokeya, the author notwithstanding the impediments caused by the purdah system and other disadvantages being born in a highly orthodox Muslim family was able to make a mark as one of the boldest feminist voices of colonial Bengal. (Bagchi ix) Published in 1903 as “Amader Abanati” (Our Downfall), essay expounds Rokeya’s feminist theory in clear terms and the frontal attack she made on men and even the women’s compliance in their subjugation “incensed even liberal thinkers of her time, men and women, Muslim and Hindu” (Sircar 120). Consequently the author was obliged to remove a part of it when she anthologized it in 1905 under the new title, “Strijatir Abanati” (The Women’s Downfall).

Addressed to contemporary womenfolk, Rokeya pondered over the present degraded state of women which she found similar to that of slaves. And like the preceding authors discussed here, Rokeya too felt that it was a male doing which he brings about through ‘social injunctions’ approved by religion. She discussed various social constructions to maintain women in their indolent ignorant state. The use of jewellery by women, Rokeya held was one such construction which is but ‘marks of our slavery’ (Rokeya 7). The women in their ignorance love adorning them unaware that they are but one of the devices to control their mobility and imprison them in docility. She saw it as ‘a sign of willing submission to masculine rule’.

Rokeya lodged protest against the gendered constructions which have been employed to keep women dependent on men and ‘defined the notion of “ideal femininity”, which dictated that women ....be imprisoned in *zenana*, expected to shun self-reliance, confidence, and respect; remain uneducated and submissive”(Sircar 122).

Thus Rokeya demanded attention to women beyond idyllic fantasies as this exquisite care and seclusion in name of protection has ruined women's mental and physical powers.

Being constantly protected from the dangers and difficulties of society, we have lost our courage, confidence and will altogether.

Renouncing self-reliance, we have become totally dependent on our husbands. (Rokeya 9)

The idea of female timidity and cowardice is but a manifestation of subjugation to which they have been subjected. The maids laden with jewels end up being 'insensate mass; her mind is even more obtuse'.

This gendered disadvantage, Rokeya wrote could be countered by the provision of female education. Then she discussed the problems associated with it and attitude of people towards women's education. She attempted to convince orthodox fears that the latter would ruin the social set up referring to the upliftment of *parsi* women. With a clear conviction she advocated vocational education for women considering them in no way less than men when given a chance. She could sense however that this idea would meet criticism by Hindus and Muslims alike, but for a genuine cause women must muster courage and work for their own salvation.

As a rebuttal to the assumed submissiveness of early Indian feminism these works contain ample evidence of an independent intellectual voice sensitive to the patriarchal manoeuvrings, voicing fearlessly their views on gender equality and contributing to an alternate discourse not taken into account. The lives of these women and their likes are examples of what challenges and resistances independent voices have to face. The question of lack of female agency in the early feminist movements in the light of such personalities, such claims fall flat and explain society's discomfort to those departing from the popular ideas. Thus we find these narratives standing at odds with the homogenized picture of our early feminism and explain their subsequent neglect. The reappraisal of the past can help in better understanding of the

indigenous feminism and re-conceptualising the role women played across the society towards social change.

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