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Book Review

Sutapa Dutta and Shivangini Tandon (eds.). (2024). *Making the 'Woman': Discourses of Gender in 18th-19th Century India*. London and New York: Routledge. Pp. 240. Price: US$ 144.00. ISBN: 9781032609041. Hardcover.

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Edited by Sutapa Dutta and Shivangini Tandon, *Making the 'Woman'* brings together 12 essays that interrogate discourses around the conception of women and gender in 18th-19th century India. The book emerged from a conference organised by the India International Society for Eighteenth Century (IISECS) in collaboration with Jamia Millia Islamia in 2020 and is dedicated to the memory of the late Professor Vijaya Ramaswamy. Like Prof. Ramaswamy, whose article on women in Tamil Mahabharatas is part of this volume, the editors and other contributors are committed to providing us with a complex and textured view of the past. They unravel the historical processes that were fashioning and reshaping new representations of women and gender binaries in this period.

In the introduction, which begins with a succinct historiographical essay on feminist debates on sex and gender, the editors argue against conceiting the category of woman as one way of being. They are quite categorical in their assertion that there is no universal category of 'woman' and no common womanhood, but its multiple imaginations and articulations. Historically and theoretically, many have already countered an overreliance on biological determinism that defines what they see as the 'social category' of woman. While the central premise of modern feminist theory is an acknowledgement of the distinction between sex and gender, with gender referring to socio-cultural forms of identity, this latter category does not have a particular and fixed external essence. A woman is made so by social forces. Other scholars seek to move away and beyond the sex/ gender dualism by seeing sex itself as an effect of gender that is reified and reiterated through a performance of gender norms (Butler 1993: 2). More recent scholarship on the subject sees gender as being as real as 'natural' sex. Since the latter is not objectively 'real' and 'natural', sex categories also depend on social practices. The distinction between men and women is thus not primarily anatomical, but social and hierarchical (Haslanger 2005: 22). These distinctions are causally and materially constructed. Feminine and masculine personalities develop due to social conditioning and early childhood parenting practices which convey and reinforce feelings of essential difference (Chodorow 1978: 78). Is there a fixed woman-ness then, that all women, beyond their differences, share? Can it be separated from other facets of one's identity?

Many scholars recognise that there is no feature that can be considered definitive of woman-ness. Rather, they view woman-ness as culturally specific, defined in conjunction with racial, class, ethnic, and national identities, and the roles inhabited by different women (Spelman 1988: 134). Notions of womanhood are not universal either and assumptions about its universality can marginalise certain sections of women (qua women) if they are seen as experiencing woman-ness in a different way. Mari Mikkola argues that complex features and conditions that classify a woman as a woman are shared, prescribed, and legitimised by societies and ideologies, and this complex universal is not necessarily epistemically incompatible with individual women's diversities (Mikkola 2006: 85). Cultural and political processes in combination with social change carry, construct, and disseminate ideologies of

'model' womanhood and thereby reconstitute patriarchal conceptualisations of femininity and woman-ness. The editors of *Making the 'Woman'* declare that the making of the woman is a perpetual process, an unremitting part of many a historical project.

The editorial focus in this book is precisely on demonstrating this project: notions of womanhood that were created and circulated in 18th-19th century colonial India, a period when a particular brand of early modernity was taking shape within South Asia. Colonialism and the responses to it played a large role in reshaping the perceptions and formations of gender, body, sexuality, domesticity, and household. Indian society engaged with western ideas and the intended and unintended consequences of colonial rule by embracing and rejecting 'modernity'. In many ways this reflected the shifting imperialist characterisation of Indian society and civilisation, from celebrating it to deeming it backward and uncivilised, often basing this evaluation on the notion of the 'degraded' status of Indian women. Colonial and missionary attempts at 'reforming' Indian society were centred around orientalist and western bourgeois ideals seeking to 'rescue' Indian women from an immoral and oppressive patriarchal structure. Many scholars have pointed out the profoundly conservative nature of these reforms, which in many ways upheld gender systems that were already in place (Sarkar 2024: 21). While these changes and reforms, even if in a limited way, were hailed by some Indian reformists of the 19th century, they were staunchly resisted by others who began venerating a traditional model of 'Indian womanhood', who was virtuous and honoured. This trend was seen in the writings of many a Hindu ideologues as well as Muslim scholars, who used theological, scriptural arguments based on an idealised past that conferred women with high status in society. The editors rightfully point out that the debates of this period cannot be contained within the 'tradition' versus 'modernity' framework, as modernity in India was itself intrinsically linked with colonial and imperialist legacy. The idea of modernity was also used and indigenised by 'native' reformers and thinkers, one example of this being the separation and fashioning of the 'public' and 'private' domains by Indian nationalists seen as appropriate realms for men and women respectively. Partha Chatterjee sees this development as reflecting the desire of upper and middle-class men to retain some form of freedom and agency in the inner realm of religion and faith, encompassed by home and family. The woman, the high-caste and Hindu person thus represented the as yet, untouched, pristine and un-colonised inner domain (Chatterjee 1989: 627). This new assertion of an ideal Indian woman was, thus, part of a larger cultural critique of colonialism and burgeoning nationalist sensibilities where women's bodies became a site for expressing the supposed superiority of Indian culture and civilisation. Nationalist and reformist entanglements with colonially mediated modernity thus 'recast' women and gender forms in a new context. The nation in nationalist thought was imagined as an ideal Indian woman who was sacrificial and dutiful, and who was to be defended and glorified. Women were considered the icons of nation, Indian culture, and their communities. With this notion, patriarchies were thus being simultaneously recast in powerful ways. It is thus not amiss for the editors here to elaborate on the various ways in which these patriarchies were being questioned and subverted, reflected in some of the essays of the volume. Perhaps incongruously, the editors include a precis of some of more recent works on the pre-colonial (16th-17th centuries) that foreground the inadequacies of the 'public' and 'private' dichotomy used to study women and gender relations in the Mughal realm. This diversion is, however, intended to point to the epistemic presence of certain traditional histories of women, written from within a rigid, and simplistic conceptual framework. Perhaps the editors are pointing to how overt reliance on unexamined categories in such research often distort the histories and historical experiences of non-western societies.

The collection of essays encompassed in *Making the 'Woman'* is divided into 4 sections, and begins with two essays that interrogate the dichotomous models of public/ private, presenting their interrogation as a lens for historical analysis of gender relations and roles. The first essay

by Shazia Malik (*Interrogating the Colonial Categorisation of Female Dancers*) examines the changing colonial discourse about female performers (Hafiza) of Kashmir. While Hafizas in question were associated with certain distinct regional art forms and Sufi poetical traditions, they were categorised as 'nautch girls' and prostitutes in the writings of European travellers and colonial officials (p. 27). Descriptions of Hafizas, both textual and pictorial, within colonial sources focusses our attention on the nexus between gender, sexuality, race, and empire. It is a valuable addition to existing research on the sexual politics of colonisation, even though I feel that the author has oversimplified the precolonial and the pre Mughal past of female performers. The author, by alluding to how the stigmatisation and exploitation of Hafizas began under the Mughals, Sikhs, Dogras, and the British, neglects the complex realities of continued gender inequalities and labour exploitation in the region. The second chapter by Tara Sami Dutt seeks to redefine concepts of public/ private by focusing on female performers who entered the *parikhana* (an institution which was part of the larger *harem*) of the last Nawab of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah (1847-56), to show how they used their skills and political acumen to rise to a status of power within the cosmopolitan but hierarchical Nawabi court and household. These women, as seen through the folios contained in the text, *Ishqnama*, were seen to move seamlessly between both public and private spaces by using multiple identities, especially as both the *zenana* (harem) and the *parikhana* were seen as state institutions. The performances of *pari*s (young female performer/ dancer) can then be seen as political acts contextualised within the politics of a kingdom that was beleaguered by the last vestiges of Nawabi rule under the growing shadow of colonial control. Though the author mentions the culturally essentialist construction of the rulers of Awadh within colonial sources, where they are seen as both barbaric and effeminate (p. 53) due to the influence and visibility of women in his court, it would have been helpful for interested readers if more details on the representations of these women within colonial discourse were included.

The next section, *Questioning the Normative*, consists of 4 essays that seek to question the various social constructs surrounding gender, caste, class, the self, and 'the other'. Riya Gupta in her chapter on the Mughal Mirza, studies conduct manuals of the 18th century, which defined ideal masculinities (and 'un-masculinities') for the Mughal service gentry and middling strata of officials at court. Based on an exposition of the discursive contrariness between men and women, these texts imagined, expressed and even mocked manliness through the deployment of certain concepts, seen in opposition to what was seen as feminine and hence, 'the other' (p. 66). It would have been beneficial if the author had situated these shifts within the larger changes that were taking place in the Mughal imperium, helping readers to see the development of these gendered subjectivities within specific and situated historical moments. Charu Gupta in her essay on Dalit women in 1857 provides readers with an illuminating account of the female icons of Dalit Hindi literature and popular memory by exploring gender politics from the perspective of caste. Since Dalit *viranganas* (women warriors) were valorised as symbols of resistance against the colonial, and upper caste Hindu order, they were projected as moral, virtuous, chaste, and courageous, 'like men'. Their representation thus reproduced and further codified the dominant patriarchal order and its gender norms within Dalit memory and history. This essay is crucial to the volume, challenging the official and mainstream documented histories of the revolt of 1857, while at the same time, widening its historiographical scope. In her article, *Gender and Tribal Identity in Western India*, Maya Unnithan-Kumar draws a contrast between the self-representation of the Girahya tribe of southern Rajasthan and their classification by others as 'inferior tribals'. The gender relations within the Girahya community is the central basis in their depiction within accounts of the non-Girahyas, legitimised by modern sociologists and anthropologists. In her essay on the changing depictions of the goddess Kali in the late 19th century in Bengali literature, Nilanjana Mukherjee presents readers with interesting dynamics of the shift from depictions of the goddess from fierce to dispossessed and besieged. A goddess of clear 'tribal' origins, her dark skin, scarred

face, and 'primitive' form was seen as a symbol of a nation in captivity, resonating with the racial and patriarchal imaginations of this period. While this section on subversive female iconography is compared to similar other subversive representations of the iconic feminine form in western history and tradition like in the case of Medusa, the Lady Liberty, or Britannia, this albeit fascinating read appears to be supervenient to the article's main argument.

The third section, on problematic 'others' contains three chapters highlighting the othering/ marginalisation of certain social groups like the Tawa'ifs (female public entertainers) and eunuchs in India. The first two chapters engage with the reimagination of the Tawa'ifs in Awadh and Delhi in 18th-19th centuries, with Tanya Burman exploring the material realities of female entertainers, whose modern representations often oscillates between colonial-nationalist condemnations of their immorality, or then, the glorification of their supposed autonomy and agency within the location of *kotha*s (loosely translated as brothels). Noble Srivastava examines the role of Tawa'ifs in Delhi's cultural landscape during a period of political instability. While criticising the gradual debasement of this 'dynamic institution' under colonial rule (p. 149), the author, in parts, appears to be perilously close to celebrating the pre-colonial and indigenous past of these women. This takes away from what is otherwise a panoptic view of the role played by women performers in the city. The third chapter by Lubna Irfan on *Eunuchs in Mughal India* or *khwajasara*s as they were called, explores the power eunuchs wielded within the Mughal household and court due to the nature of their gender identity that transcended the binaries of Mughal elite culture. On the other hand, their mobility also resulted in their demonisation in the accounts of European travellers.

The last section, titled Narratives of Femininity, explores different narratives of femaleness within the material and ideological dynamics of colonialism, and in the emergent reformist and nationalist ideas in 18th-19th century India. In one of the most significant essays in the volume, Vijaya Ramaswamy focuses on the women characters in the Tamil Mahabharatas which emerge from the interactions between local oral traditions and Sanskrit textual versions. These Mahabharatas contain protagonists that can be termed 'deviant females' as they often challenge and thwart the heroes of the more mainstream iteration. But, at the same time, these texts were hardly 'non-patriarchal', as they often reiterated the subordinate status of women, made complaisant within the narratives. Meenakshi Malhotra turns our attention to the liminal category of the girl child in 18th-19th century Bengal. Through a study of *agomani* songs (songs welcoming the goddess to the *Navratri* festival), sung during Durga Puja, Malhotra explores the contemporary conceptualisations of the collective female childhood, a category missing from print literature and culture. In the last chapter, Nizara Hazarika examines the literary discourses of women writers from 19th century Assam. In the writings about missionary women, and later, notions of domesticity among Assamese women, the author posits a discussion of how gender and self-identity were being constructed without challenging patriarchal structures and their prescribed norms. The main leitmotif of the book is further explored here: the impact of 'new modernity' on women and on gender formulations that were entangled with the socio-political and epistemological strands of colonialism, reformist, and nationalist ideologies, along with the material changes they harbingered.

In the last few decades, there have been several crucial books challenging stereotypes about Indian women, specially countering their alleged 'invisibility' in the histories of pre-colonial and colonial India (Sangari & Vaid 2003, Sarkar 2024). This volume is a welcome addition to the existing body of scholarship on the subject, refining our understanding of women's lives and roles in the 18th and the 19th centuries and the various constructions of womanhood and gender identities. The chapters of *Making the 'Woman'* explore the diverse implications of contemporary developments on the positioning of women and men in what was a period of immense transformation. While the tremendous impact of the western/ colonial hegemonic

structure is acknowledged, without denying agency to Indian subjects, the chapters undertake a robust discussion of marginalised gender categories as well. The editors admit that the book is not meant to be completely inclusive in its attempt to understand the 'making of woman'. At the same time, it successfully unravels many complex interfaces between colonialism, nation, culture and gender. Some aspects do however remain unscrutinised: for example it is surprising that women's healthcare and the larger politics of reproductive and mental health remains neglected despite it constituting such a crucial theme in the exploration of colonial modernity, especially with many diseases being characterised as exclusively female. The medical discourse was predicated after all on an essentialist notion of gender, racial, and cultural difference. The issue of women's role within the changing economic structure is also left largely untouched. However, these absences do not detract from the volume's main purpose and strength, with its many tightly argued and searching chapters, providing readers with scholarly intervention on the study of women, culture, and nation. This volume will be useful, not only for scholars, but for anyone wondering about how the larger developments of this period redrew patriarchal and gender forms and structures in India.

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