Feminism, imperialism and race: a dialogue between India and Britain
Barbara N. Ramusack & Antoinette Burton

Available online: 20 Dec 2006

To cite this article: Barbara N. Ramusack & Antoinette Burton (1994): Feminism, imperialism and race: a dialogue between India and Britain, Women's History Review, 3:4, 469-481
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09612029400200065

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
INTRODUCTION

Feminism, Imperialism and Race:
a dialogue between India and Britain

BARBARA N. RAMUSACK
University of Cincinnati, USA

ANTOINETTE BURTON
Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA

In *Empire and Sexuality, the British experience*, Ronald Hyam confidently wrote that “feminist studies remain of limited value to the general historian.”[1] To explain what he called “the poverty of feminism” for historical work and more specifically, for the field of imperial history, Hyam cited feminist scholars’ fundamental “hostility to sex” and their “feminist dogma about the supposedly ‘pervasive violence against women by men,’” both of which he characterized as “sour and immature views” and “feminist hysteries.”[2] In her trenchant review of his book, Margaret Strobel observed that Hyam referenced only five feminist scholars, and that while he provided “a compendium of little-discussed information”, his analysis was “limited.”[3] Most significantly in terms of the ideologies and practices of imperial historiography, Hyam claimed that “the feminism we have at present is, no doubt, a fairly primitive and exploratory version.”[4] Having disavowed the tendency “to make simplistic and moralising value judgements” about the sexual behaviors of men, women, and children in the British empire, he proceeded to ground his book not just in a dismissal of feminist theoretical critique but in a decidedly Darwinistic view of the place of feminism on the academic evolutionary scale. In doing so Hyam echoed the fears harbored by Victorian anti-feminists and early Edwardian anti-suffragists that hysterical feminist women threatened the very bases of British society as they knew it.[5]

Hyam’s anxiety represents the resistance in some quarters of the historiographical establishment in Britain and elsewhere to the theoretical
challenges posed to it by current debates on empire, its relationship to ‘home’ and its influence in shaping ‘domestic’ and colonial identities.[6] It testifies to the deliberate erasure of feminist scholarly production and hence of women’s lived experiences from the field of imperial history as it is developing in the late twentieth century - a field that, as Suvendrini Perera has remarked, thrives even as the success of British imperialism itself recedes.[7] Hyam is not alone in this maneuver. The impressive series ‘Studies in Imperialism’ which includes Hyam’s book infrequently attends to issues of gender or the subject of women, despite the volume of critical theoretical work available that interrogates those topics as they pertain to imperialism from an historical perspective. David Cannadine’s lengthy expository essay on the fate of British history after the 1980s also fails conspicuously to acknowledge the work of feminist and post-colonial historians on the British Isles, except to quote G. R. Elton to the effect that the solution to the crisis in national historiography is that we need “more kings and queens” and less of “this non-existent history of ethnic entities and women”. [8] And although the intellectual roots of these increasingly visible ‘imperial’ concerns are often ascribed to ‘post-colonial’ or ‘postmodernist’ intellectual trends, they owe a critical debt to feminist theory and women’s studies which is rarely acknowledged.[9] Finally, some of the most challenging work to derive from Said’s Orientalism fails to deal with operations of gender in the constitution of orientalist discourses or the implications of feminist literary criticism for critiques of orientalism – so much so that “one blushes”, as Virginia Woolf wrote of Kipling, “as if one had been caught eavesdropping at some purely masculine orgy”. [10]

There is, as Antoinette Burton’s essay in this issue suggests, a change afoot in what has heretofore been considered the ‘domestic’ historiography of Britain, where the work of Leonore Davidoff, Catherine Hall, and Mary Poovey has troubled the traditional boundaries between ‘empire’ and ‘home’ and has done so using specifically feminist methodologies. Recent research by Moira Ferguson and Clare Midgley continues this feminist revision of the history of the British Isles and requires that we rethink the boundaries between Britain on the one hand and its colonial ‘possessions’ on the other.[11] Whether these excavations will alter what Lata Mani calls the dominant narrative of colonialism – “We came, we saw, we were horrified, we intervened” – remains to be seen.[12]

In general, South Asian historians have been more receptive to some of the insights of feminist theorists and specialists in women’s studies than historians of British imperialism. Prominent scholars of the dominant subaltern constellation of historians, most notably Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, Ranajit Guha, and Sumit Sarkar, have incorporated gender as a category and women as a group into their analyses of nationalism, a pivotal theme in modern Indian historiography.[13] For example, Chatterjee has argued that the lack of nationalist attention to the
‘women’s question’ by the latter decades of the nineteenth century indicates that middle-class Indian nationalists thought they had resolved the problem to their own satisfaction. They confined women to the inner world of the home where the spiritual purity of the Indian nation was to be preserved from colonial pollution. This strategy reconfigured patriarchal relationships which permitted Indian men to remain dominant in the domestic sphere despite their subordination in the public arena of colonial politics.[14] Chakrabarty highlights the ways in which the bhadralok, literally the respectable people and more generally upper-caste, middle-class Hindu Bengali men, sought to transform the patriarchal extended family into the patriarchal bourgeois family based on companionate marriage. These nationalist husbands wanted their wives to obey them freely and not as servants. Their spouses were to combine bourgeois, Victorian domesticity, which the men deemed a prerequisite of a modern nation state, with the qualities of Hindu goddesses such as Lakshmi (good fortune) and Sita (the wife of the hero of the epic Ramayana). Implicitly Chakrabarty points up the dilemma which educated bhadrakshaks, the women relatives of the bhadralok, confronted. On the one hand, they were advised not to use their freedom to behave like memsahibs. On the other hand, women in their extended families waned them to retain their agency in resisting the requests of their companionate husbands to participate in the public sphere.[15]

Although these analyses have stimulated much productive debate and writing, feminist critiques and women as primary subject matter have yet to penetrate the core of South Asian ‘domestic’ historiography as presented by the subalterns. In the seven volumes of Subaltern Studies, Ranajit Guha has published the single essay which explores the agency of subaltern or ‘inferior’ women, namely kinwomen of a lowly cultivating caste in western Bengal who arranged in 1849 for an abortion of a child conceived out of wedlock. Moreover, subaltern historians tend to rely primarily on sources generated by British or Indian men and only incidentally incorporate sources produced by women themselves. In 1989 Veena Das, a sociologist, noted the absence of gender in the subaltern analysis, [16] and more recently feminist historians of South Asia have begun to question some of the prevailing modes of analysis by subaltern and post-modern historians. The works of Tanika Sarkar and Janaki Nair are good examples of this development. Sarkar is critical of those, mainly subalterns and feminists in the first world, who “have come to identify the structures of colonial knowledge as the originary moment for all possible kinds of power and disciplinary formations. ... As a result, the colonised subject is absolved of all complicity and culpability in the makings of the structures of exploitation in the last two hundred years ...”[17] In analyzing the death of a child-wife from sexual abuse, she seeks a reassessment of the value placed on contestation of colonial reforms when militant nationalism stifles the
protests of child brides and declares itself to be the realm of unfreedom. Nair interrogates the glorification of the agency of Indian women within patriarchal structures when there is no articulation of the need or possibilities of moving outside such constraints.[18]

As in the field of British history, feminist scholars working on South Asian history have tackled a variety of topics: social reform, suffrage, nationalist politics, and masculinity to name a few of the most prominent. They range from Meredith Borthwick’s foundational work on middle-class Bengali women, to Geraldine Forbes’s studies of women and suffrage and nationalist politics, to Madhu Kishwar’s analysis of Gandhi and women, to Lata Mani’s rethinking of the campaign to prohibit sati, and to Sumathi Ramaswamy’s examination of language and women’s politics in Tamilnad.[19] There are also crucial efforts to recover South Asian women’s voices: Forbes’s ‘Foremother’ series of autobiographies will include memoirs of Sudha Mazumdar, Manomohan Sen, and Haimavati Sen; Susie Tharu & K. Lalita have edited two massive volumes of writings by Indian women; and a women’s collective has produced an oral history of women in a communist-led peasant uprising during the mid-1940s.[20]

In much of British imperial and South Asian history, British women in India appear as dedicated missionaries or narrow-minded wives who sapped the commitment to India of their officer husbands. A reassessment of memsahibs, missionaries, and British women activists began in the mid-1970s [21] and a representative sample of this research is included in Western Women and Imperialism: complicity and resistance (1992).[22] The subtitle of this collection reflects the ambivalent position, attitudes, and activities of British women that are dominant motifs of this scholarship. More recently Kamala Visweswaran has analyzed the multiple relationships of British feminists and Indian women activists through the prism of a non-Brahman South Indian woman leader, Muthulakshmi Reddy. She argues that there were areas of convergence (labelled thematic) between Western and Indian feminists on topics of suffrage and citizenship and of divergence (labelled problematic) over the constitution of the Indian family.[23]

In this Special Issue we wish to extend this enterprise by foregrounding the work of feminist historians and historians of women as they examine the ramifications of Britain’s imperial enterprise and India’s nationalizing project in a wider variety of geographical locations, cultural discourses, and historical moments. Our goal is not simply to refute the contemptuous stance of Hyam and his partisans and to reinsert British women into South Asian history, but rather to materialize and substantiate the claims which feminist scholarship makes to produce an ongoing, self-critical critique of Britain’s imperial past and, specifically, of India’s role in shaping it. We do this too in the knowledge that the ‘post’ in post-colonial is something of a redherring because the colonial past “is by no means over and done with”.[24] As the various fields of post-colonial critiques of the

472
bourgeois nationalist project in South Asia, the “new imperial history” [25] and feminist/cultural studies grow in scope and depth, we wish to sustain a critique of ‘business’ – especially the business of British, of imperial, of South Asian, and even of feminist history – ‘as usual’.

The essays collected here come out of a conference organized by Barbara Ramusack and Kali Israel at the University of Cincinnati in October 1992 [26]. On a return trip from a series of panels at the 1991 annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, they lamented their frustration that, in North America, British and South Asian historians of women met only on rare occasions at meetings of the American Historical Association (AHA) where they were small specks in a vast ocean of indifference or at the triennial Berkshire Conference on the History of Women where they were overwhelmed by choices. Quickly they conceived the plan to hold a workshop/conference for historians of British and South Asian women within the imperial framework in a setting where panelists and audience would not be evicted from a room just as the discussion became interesting. Besides their underlying goal of establishing an ongoing dialogue, another was to bring together scholars of three generations: those trained in the late 1950s and early 1960s before feminist scholarship had been named; those trained in the late 1970s and early 1980s when a feminist approach to women’s history began to be consciously articulated and practiced; and graduate students who were in the process of formulating, researching, and writing dissertations and viewed feminist analysis as a fundamental orientation.

Not all papers presented or submitted to the conference – namely those by Joyce Dixon, Dagmar Engels, Philippa Levine, Thomas Metcalf, and Minalini Sinha – could be included in this issue because of time and space constraints as well as prior commitments [27]. One unintended consequence has been that there is more attention given here to British women than to Indian women. The editors hope to rectify this situation in a subsequent volume. Taken together, the essays presented here do much to demolish Hyam’s assertion that feminist historical praxis has nothing to offer either ‘British’ history as conventionally conceived or the histories of ‘imperial Britain’ as they are being re-imagined and re-configured. At the same time they illustrate how the British Empire was a lived experience for Indian women, influencing their life patterns, economic options, and professional careers.

Although there are a number of contemporary feminist theorists and historians of women who are grappling with the dimensions of historical practice, [28] contributors to this volume have been influenced, whether directly or indirectly, by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid’s succinct articulation in their splendid collection, Recasting Women:

A feminist historiography rethinks historiography as a whole and discards the idea of women as something to be framed by a context, in

473
order to be able to think of gender difference as both structuring and structured by the wide set of social relations. In this sense, feminist historiography is a choice open to all historians ... a choice which cannot but undergird any attempt at historical reconstruction which undertakes to demonstrate our sociality in the full sense, and is ready to engage with its own pre-suppositions of the social moments and movements it sets out to represent.[29]

There are, as the articles here illustrate, many directions in which sympathizers with or adherents of these principles can go. Whether the topic is the constitution of domesticity in the Indian railway colonies (Laura Bear), the relationship of Theosophy to feminism and imperialism (Nancy Fix Anderson), the biography of an Indian 'lady doctor' (Geraldine Forbes), or the crisis of contemporary British historiography (Antoinette Burton and Jeffrey Cox), there are certain basic convictions which flow from this foundation. Primary among those is that “defining gender ... [is] crucial to the formation of classes and dominant ideologies” and that gender relations are relations of power mediated by a variety of cultural institutions and discourses – race, class, empire, and caste being chief among those in the British-Indian experience.[30] These are historically feminist insights, even while they are often used without recognition of their origins or political purposes. And while it has become something of a truism that “the inscription of empire is encoded as an inscription of gender”, each essay collected here demonstrates not just how variously those operations can work in different contexts, but how imperial identities and colonial subjectivities are both confirmed and contested in the process.[31] In that sense we hopefully engage the concern of Lata Mani and other feminist critics that discussions of agency have been “framed around the limited and analytically unhelpful opposition of coercion and consent”, particularly in the colonial context.[32]

Issues of agency are present in most of these essays and contrasts are particularly highlighted in those on Dr Haimavati Sen and Margaret Cousins. Geraldine Forbes's recovery of the autobiography of Sen demonstrates the multiple benefits of persistent sleuthing to retrieve the voices of Indian women. Sen's life vividly illustrates how one Indian woman negotiated a medical career and economic independence between the patriarchal constraints imposed by Bengali reformers and the professional ones erected by ambitious British men and women physicians. Two doctoral students are presently exploring in greater depth the interaction of British and Indian women in the practice of Western medicine. Chandrika Paul has shown how British men, seeking to maintain the reputation of the colonial Bengal government as a liberal reformer, overruled Bengali bhadralok who wished to deny Bengali women access to medical education to channel them into new roles as companionate wives.[33] Maneesha Lal has carefully delineated the early years of the Dufferin Fund founded to provide medical
care to Indian women as part of her dissertation on women medical missionaries in India.[34]

Catherine Candy’s exploration of the ideology and activities of Margaret Cousins reflects the often contradictory efforts of a woman displaced in the metropole who migrated to a colony where she attempted to construct an identity and a role among the competing demands of Irish nationalism, British suffragism, Theosophical commitment, Indian feminism, Indian nationalism, and British imperialism. Candy’s analysis is especially innovative in highlighting the impact of sexuality and marriage on the intellectual and organizational directions of Cousins’s life. Despite her good intentions, Cousins ends up essentializing the Indian women whom she mentored and deemed to be colleagues. Nancy Fix Anderson historicizes the changing attitudes of Annie Besant toward social reform programs directed toward Indian women and further demonstrates the difficulties of such projects. Both Anderson and Candy are implicitly responding to Jenny Sharpe’s challenge to explain “how colonialism has left its indelible mark on European women”.[35]

No collection of essays ever considers all the significant aspects of a topic. This one is no exception. With the goal of stimulating future research as well as to reduce cries of anguish from those whose work we have unknowingly slighted, we mention some areas where we hope for contributions to an expanded venture. First, as mentioned above, the complex and tense interactions among Indian women and British women need to be further delineated. Second, there should be more attention to the ways in which class mediated the experiences of both British and Indian women within the imperial context. Bear’s work on domiciled European women in the railway colonies broadens the categories of class outward from memsahibs and middle-class activists such as Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins to include British subalterns. Chaudhuri’s work points up the need for analyses of servants from their own voices. An investigation of ayahs beyond the work of Rosina Visram might be one starting point.[36] One bemoans the absence of a memoir such as A Daughter of Han: the autobiography of a Chinese working woman where Ning Lao Tai Tai vividly recounted what she disliked about working for foreign missionaries ranging from her mistress’s use of her son’s diapers as sanitary napkins to her demand that servants should be constantly working throughout the day.[37] Third, we need more explicit examinations of sexuality from the perspectives of both Indian and British women. Although scholars are examining colonial efforts to confine the sexuality of its civilian and military personal to controlled arenas of homes populated with memsahibs or brothels inhabited by inspected Indian prostitutes, [38] feminist historians have yet to consider in depth the relationship between sexuality and desire in the imperial environment. Fictional characters, such as Adela Quested in Passage to India, Marjorie Layton in Jewel in the Crown, and Olivia in Heat
and Dust provide our most sustained glimpse of mensahibs and sexual adventure. [39] Sexuality and desire seem less in evidence for Indian women, with the dramatic exception of Rabinramanath Tagore's haunting novel, The Home and the World, which Satyajit Ray translated into film in 1984. Moving from the protected confines of the domestic zenana into the world of nationalist politics during agitation over the partition of Bengal in 1907, Tagore's heroine, Bimala, is sexually attracted to the politically radical Bengali nationalist who bails her as the incarnation of Mother India. [40] Some recent scholarship has argued that the evocation of Indian women as mothers of the nation desired Indian women and introduced new possibilities for limiting women's agency, but more research on sexuality would be informative. [41]

Although we lament the lack of critical engagement with feminist theory and historical praxis in contemporary debates on empire, national identity, and colonial subjectivities, we do not mean to disaggregate feminist work from cultural or post-colonial studies per se. Historical and anthropological research by Mani, Sangari, Vaid, Chandra Mohanty, and Trinh T. Minh-Ha all demonstrate how disciplines can inform one another, and how inseparable their theoretical premises often are. While each is concerned with different moments and movements, all share the tenet that race and gender systems are mutually constitutive in the construction of cultural institutions, ideologies, and socio-political identities - a mutuality which Nupur Chaudhuri suggests in her essay on mensahibs and their servants and Catherine Carty does too in her analysis of Margaret Cousins. Implicit in this work also is the inseparability of metropole and empire - in this case, Britain and its Indias, India and its Britains - neither of which can or should be seen as distinct or separate 'spheres'. Each is simultaneously constitutive of the Other - or, as Jane Haggis would have it, they are 'Dialogic' and interactive. [42] Significantly, while some essays here are not concerned explicitly with discourse, those that are do not view cultural domination merely as a theoretical construct, but as Gauri Viswanathan has written in Masks of Conquest, as "an uncannily accurate description of historical process, subject to the vagaries of particular circumstances" [43].

Attention to historical specificity and cultural particularities is one concern manifestly shared by feminists and cultural theorists alike, and it remains one of the strengths of post-colonial studies when undertaken in conjunction with feminist methodologies and commitments.

Given the vast material being generated on empire, the reach of its influence and the limits of its authority, it is tempting to view these arguments, and perhaps this Special Issue, as common-sensical or even redundant. Indeed, in March 1993, in the Times Literary Supplement P. J. Marshall argued that "the showy high imperialism of the late-nineteenth century can be demonstrated to have been superficial and ephemeral in its impact." [44] Such certainties echo J. R. Seeley's late Victorian claim that
empire was acquired “in a fit of absence of mind”. They risk making irrelevant that which was formative, if not central, to historically situated European cultural identities and, more dangerously, they work to naturalize as benign what were crude expressions of British political power and ideological domination. Such evaluations can also function as a means of dismissing the role of feminism, of women, and of ‘natives’ in constituting imperial relations, colonial resistance, and not least, historiographical authority – since it is, coincidentally, mainly women, feminists, and/or ‘ex-colonials’ (whether South Asian, Afro-Caribbean, Canadian, Irish or American) who are raising contemporary challenges to established imperial history[45] Seeley’s remark was turned by later imperial historians into the quip that empire was acquired “in a fit of absence of wives” and, perhaps not surprisingly, it gained currency thanks to the work of Ronald Hyam.[46] Historically, the woman question has been an integral part of the imperial and nationalist projects. Historiographically, questions of women, gender, India, Britain, and feminism are no less complicated, and certainly no less implicated.

Notes

[6] For an example of the denial - or at best, the avoidance - of these challenges by an established ‘imperial’ historian, see also P. J. Marshall (1993) No fatal impact? the elusive history of imperial Britain, The Times Literary Supplement, 12 March, pp. 8-10.
INTRODUCTION


[18] J. Nair (1994) On the question of female agency in Indian feminist historiography, *Gender and History*, 6, pp. 82-100. We are indebted to the author for an early draft of this article which was presented at the Association of Asian Studies, Washington, April 1992.


[23] V. Visveswaran, unpublished paper, On the origins of Indian feminism: problematics and thematics. We are grateful to the author for providing us with a copy of this work in progress.


[25] This is the title of a paper read by Catherine Hall at the 62nd Annual Anglo-American Conference at the Institute of Historical Research; London, July 1993.

[26] They wish to acknowledge with deep appreciation the generous support from the Charles Phelps Taft Memorial Fund of the McMicken College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Cincinnati for the Conference on Feminism, Imperialism, and Race: India and Britain, and for the expenses involved in preparing the conference papers for publication.

INTRODUCTION


480
1793-1905 (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson); Levine, Venereal disease, prostitution and the politics of empire.

[39] For an exciting reinterpretation of Queested's ambivalence toward her identity with British colonialism, see Sharpe, Allegories of Empire, Ch. 5. Sharpe also has a chapter on Jewel in the Crown, but there she focuses on Daphne Manners who is raped and does not consider the sexuality of Mrs Layton or her two daughters.

[40] It is interesting to note that Sandip, the nationalist and promoter of swadeshi or Indian-made goods, is reputed to have had sexual affairs with non-swadeshi women, that is non-'Indian or British women. Nicholas Dirks has mentioned the sexual attraction of Bimala to Sandip but has not analyzed how it reflected the sexual ambivalence which could exist in Indian women while they were being hailed as Mother India. We are grateful to the author for an early draft of his paper, 'The home and the world: the invention of modernity in colonial India'.

[41] A thoughtful analysis of sexuality and the subject position of Indian women is in Kamala Visweswaran (1990) Family subjects: an ethnography of the 'woman question' in Indian nationalism, unpublished PhD dissertation, Stanford University, especially the chapter on the modesty of the modern.


[45] We are grateful to Jocelyn Zivin for prompting this observation.