

Book Reviews

Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia during British Colonial Rule*, Routledge: New York & London, 1995, ISBN 0-415-91104-4 (cloth), ISBN 0-415-91105-2 (pbk.).

Take up the White Man's burden –
 Send forth the best ye breed –
 Go, bind your sons in exile
 To serve your captive's need;
 To wait in heavy harness
 On fluttered folk and wild –
 Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
 Half-devil and half-child.

(Quoted in Preface to Jayawardena's *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia during British Colonial Rule*.)

Whether the above verse from Rudyard Kipling's *The White Man's Burden* (1899) forms the most apt preface to Jayawardena's *The White Woman's Other Burden* may, indeed, be a matter of debate. For, the woman's question in the history of colonialism has always been an issue of contention. Imperialism, in its own way, has practically remained a male domain. History has credited the white men with all major feats associated with colonialism – acquisition of colonies, perpetuation of military and political dominance, imposition of a utilitarian mode of governance, and so on. White women, on other hand, have often been depicted as helpmates, assistants of the authoritative men in their 'masculine' burden of ruling the Empire. Colonial metanarratives have held up 'dubious' images of the 'memsahib' – proud, disdainful, fragile, arrogant, inaccessible, enticing, headers of an educated and modern era in the 'dark' colonies, or potent evils who ultimately lost

the white men their empire. Varied indeed were the notions regarding the white women of the colonial era, stuck within the conflicting parameters of gender, class and race. All the same, disregarded by historians, and neglected greatly in social and political documents, white women basically remained obscured in colonial history, and have, till date, remained one of the most ambiguous and disputed entities of the 'Raj'.

Contemporary trends in feminism and gender studies have, however, raised objections against all such kinds of colonial accounts which, under the covers of 'gendered' images, have sought to keep back ideas regarding women's true stature in the colonies, their agency, power and role in the imperial and patriarchal power-matrix, and have depicted them as failures and subverted entities in the Empire. Shifts in gender perspectives since the 1970s and 1980s have occasioned a thorough re-viewing and re-visioning of the roles and positioning of white women within the colonial regime, so as to discover women's actual place in the history of colonialism. Jayawardena's *The White Woman's Other Burden* has been a novel attempt in this task of re-envisioning the lives and experiences of colonizing women from an innovative angle, and viewing them not as passive agents of the Empire but as competent agencies in their own right. Although written way back in 1995, the book still remains highly relevant and worth perusing in the contemporary decade, by virtue of its quality of looking at the lives and activities of the historically neglected British women in South Asia from a new, feminist perspective, and trying to judge white women's varied responses to colonialism as well the reactions of colonized men and women to the activities of the foreign ladies. While some of the white women were singularly supportive of the Empire, there were many others who harboured a rather ambivalent attitude with regard to colonial politics as well as their own status in the hierarchical set-up. There were women actively involved in movements of nationalism, social reform, political independence and women's rights in the colonies, much of these having close connections with numerous religious, liberal, revolutionary and feminist movements lodged in their own nations. They were mostly dissenters who challenged the social ideologies and orthodox political establishments they lived under, and duly sympathized with the colonized – victims of oppression like themselves. They were attracted by the culture, religion and customs of the natives. While mainstream colonial history has primarily recorded the power-politics of the Empire and of the potential of the white men in holding up the banner of imperialism, the significant roles played by the

women of the Empire have practically remained unofficial and unknown, forming a huge bulk of 'underground' colonial history. Jayawardena makes a serious attempt to discover these lesser-known links between Western women and South Asia, as they strive to bind together two worlds – the Western socialist and feminist agencies with the Indian nationalist and reformist organizations. The book offers glimpses into how foreign women influenced the local movements on women's issues and rights by bringing forth such ideas of independence and commitment to changes as prevalent in their own country, and sincerely calls upon historians to go back to history and delve out critical, unexplored aspects from the lives of these lesser-known women so as to re-vision colonialism once again from a new perspective.

Beginning with a stray reference to Katherine Mayo and Margaret Noble (more popularly known as Sister Nivedita, Swami Vivekananda's Irish disciple), Jayawardena reflects upon the highly contrasting attitudes of the Western women towards Indians. While there were, on one side, women like Mayo who launched pungent criticisms on Indian social life and mores, its oppression of women and decadent sexual culture, there were also, on the other side, women like Noble who celebrated Indian family life and the empowering aspects of women in Indian culture. The difference was one of perspective. South Asians branded the critic as the 'bad' western women, and the empathizer as the 'good'. To them, the 'good' women included those white women who worked for national and social liberation even at the stake of fighting against the mighty British Empire. These were the 'goddesses' who had streets and schools named after them, and were long remembered with fondness. However, Jayawardena's motive has not been just to analyse such categorizations on the basis of polarities. What she actually tries is to reconsider the whole issue of colonialism in terms of race, gender and feminism, to examine the roles of western women who dared to speak 'differently', and evaluate the varied reactions they had to encounter from native men and women as well as the men of their own race as they came forth with their revolutionary views on women's issues and the woman's question in India.

The coming of white women to the colonies was very closely related to the decisions of the colonial office in England to employ the white women for the purpose of lending company to the white men so as to prevent their liaisons with native women, and guard the 'purity' of their race. As an obvious consequence, women who socialized with local men were accused

of racial betrayal, and were even classed as sexually perverted. Mainstream colonial history curtly denounced such women who married or had associations with local men, but what has hardly been spoken of in these discourses is the crucial reality of the 'double alienation' of the colonial wife – isolated as a woman bonded within the four walls, and also as a foreigner in the public arena in the colonies. By pointing her finger at such vital spheres still largely enveloped in obscurity and darkness, Jayawardena aptly highlights problem areas and gaps in colonial history which actually demand critical investigation.

Structured into five parts, Jayawardena's book emphasizes fundamental areas of white women's life and activities in colonial South Asia. The first part – 'Saving the Sisters from the Sacred Cows' – is devoted to those foreign missionaries who spearheaded movements for Christianizing and modernizing in the colonies. Through these reformative activities, the foreign women tried to discover that space for opportunities in the public domain which had been denied to them in the home country. However, their motives were met with a variety of responses in the colonies. If the imperial masters viewed such activities as threatening indications of an imminent uprising by the newly educated and enlightened natives, the local people often saw such initiatives as supportive of imperialism, subverting local religion and traditional culture revered for ages. The propagation of such ideas by most of the missionaries that they were bringing salvation and the light of true faith to a people steeped in the darkness arose the indignation of those Indians who felt rebellious at the thought that their ways of life were looked down upon by the foreigners as 'barbaric' and 'savage'. Missionary activities became largely identified with colonial rule, which led to a practical denouncing of these missionary nuns in most of the nationalist discourses. The missionaries' ideas about women's reform created the widespread belief that they were trying to divert the docile South Asian women from their conventional roles of 'good wives and mothers' and were instilling in them such ideas which would tear apart the established norms of the society. *Zenana* education was looked upon as a devil's workshop. Thus, in many cases, these first women professionals of the colonies found themselves combating dual assaults – the male chauvinism of their own society and the ridicule of the colonized natives.

The second part - 'Mothering India' - concerns itself with those professional women and social workers who had strong beliefs in the 'civilizing mission', but did not tread upon the missionaries' method of

classing the natives and their ways of life as heathen. Their work was primarily reformatory, and they worked towards the establishment of hospitals, schools, *ashrams* with the purpose of alleviating social evils. Josephine Butler, Mary Carpenter, Annette Ackroyd, Clara Swain, Edith Pechey, Mary Rutnam were few of the numerous women reformers who strolled the South Asian colonies, launching campaigns against evident social maladies. While their task, in one way, was to hold up the image of a righteous British empire where social justice prevailed and thereby legitimize imperial authority, their activities were, more often than not, viewed with a more sympathetic and admiring vision than those of the missionaries by even the natives.

Part three – ‘Consolation in an Alien Society’ – concerns those Western women who had a slightly different attitude from both the categories dealt with in the previous two sections. Considering themselves to be the products of a rapacious and materialistic West, these independent-minded women travelled abroad for a cause, but in the process left no stone unturned to assert themselves even in opposition to Christian patriarchy and colonial authority which they feared would engulf them too. Rejection of orthodox Christianity made them desirous to strive for conservation and regeneration of Eastern ideals. These were the Orientalists who studied Hindu, Islam and Buddhist scriptures and summarily denied the exclusive claim of Christianity of finding the truth. Annie Besant, Helena Blavatsky, Florence Farr were eminent among these women who found consolation and light in Hindu occultism and theosophy. Considering themselves to be genuinely ardent spiritualists who advocated not only the cause of women’s rights but also stood for such social issues as abolition of slavery, reform of marriage, health and dress reform and so on, they earned permanent remembrance, but were also equally labeled as ingenious and interesting imposters by the imperialists on one side, and by those nationalists on the other who could not associate them with their own struggles for freedom.

South Asians, as already seen, were often wary of the foreign ‘women devils’ who seemed to them to be using education and reforms as means of targeting the beliefs and customs of the people, but many of them harboured a special affection for those women who readily and openly identified themselves with Asiatic religion and philosophy, and turned into holy mothers and cult figures. Part four of the book, entitled, ‘White Women in Search of Black Gods’ offers glimpses into the sentiments of those women

who attained more prominence than any of their western sisters and even Indian counterparts by virtue of their spiritual images and supports to the nationalist movements. They undertook reformist movements no doubt, but in the very novel manner of idolizing the Vedic society and attributing all social evils to be aberrations from the ancient golden ideals. This undoubtedly had an impact on the Indian minds like never before, and female ‘saints’ like Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita), Mirra Richard (the Mother) and Madeleine Slade (Mira Behn) were instantaneously the role models for Indian women. They were at the forefront of propagating the ‘brotherhood’ of all, holding that truth was not exclusive to Christianity, making India and Indian culture their home, introducing Western concepts of liberalization to the colonies, and thereby posing a severe threat to the invulnerable Empire.

Finally, the last section, ‘Comrades in Arms’, brings out the case of those Western socialist women who indeed came out with the batons to fight imperialism. Missionaries who claimed their rights as women to travel and lead missions, theosophists who reflected the ‘feminist breakthrough’ by their rejection of the orthodox church and appropriation of alternative cultures, Orientalists and Holy Mothers who adored the Asiatic traditions, were no doubt viewed dubiously by imperialists, but nowhere was female audacity more visible to them than in case of the socialists who took female liberation to the extent of actively opposing colonialism and patriarchal structures, taking part in anti-colonial and nationalistic movements, thus posing a clear and subversive challenge to the greatest institution of the West – imperialism. Their stories have, more acutely than any of the others, been left out in imperialistic discourses by the imperial masters who felt abused and embarrassed by their existence.

Jayawardena’s attempts to venture into un-intruded mazes of colonial history raise many crucial questions like: What were the reactions of the local women to the raging questions of global sisterhood? Could they accord themselves with Western ideas of feminism in the heydays of nationalistic struggles when commitment to the nation was considered paramount and superior to everything else? Could the Western women be successful in creating a universalistic sentiment or discourse on the rights of women, irrespective of race, ethnicity, class, cultural differences and political agendas? Jayawardena writes that the *ghar* and *bahir* polemics as established in the Eastern cultures could not make the colonized women relish the idea of ‘publicizing’ of women’s roles so spontaneously. For most

of them, a trespassing into the public domain was a threat to their identity as wives, daughters and mothers. Those who embraced Western feminism and became 'local feminists' were castigated by the native men as subverted bourgeois women, inspired by foreign ideology, and bribed with foreign money to promote chaos in the family and bring about cultural degeneracy. Similarly, opinions by the Western women of South Asians being backward and in need of 'experts' from the West to teach them how to improve made the local women adopt a defensive position, and justify the oppressive features of their own cultures. No wonder, in most of the nationalistic discourses, western feminism which launched critiques on Asian societies was branded as 'neocolonialism' – a notion to be done away with. Perhaps such a situation can, to a fair extent, be also attributed to the myopic visions of those Western feminists who failed to appreciate the critical intricacies of multiculturalism while trying to homogenize on the basis of gender. What the author actually emphasizes is the distortion that is liable to sprout out of a type of universalism that only takes gender into account, disregarding ethnic, class and political variations.

On the whole, Jayawardena's book has been a laudable endeavour to show what was often ignored in any study of colonialism – that is, how colonialism itself was gendered. Colonialism was not just a matter of domination of the non-whites by the whites; it was equally a domination by colonial men of women – both colonizing and colonized. If colonized women were the 'Other' to the colonizing men in terms of race and class, even the colonizing women were 'Other' to the men of their own race with respect to gender. White women socializing with local women were branded as 'undesirable Europeans', fanatics, anarchists, but hardly have historians taken into account the considerations of that gender consciousness which actually provoked the white women to develop a feminist perception and strive for 'global sisterhood' which defied any form of patriarchal and capitalist oppression across boundaries of class and race. By calling attention to such neglected aspects of colonial history, Jayawardena's book necessitates the urgency to unearth these critical facts by recovering women's mute voices in colonialism, which is one of the most burning areas of modern historiography in the 21st century.

Adopting the Asian feminist gaze, Jayawardena has endeavoured in her book to evaluate the varied perspectives of the 'Mothers of feminism' who shouldered the burden of creating 'the New Woman'. The author's style is lucid, and the representation of conflicting views from opposite

spectrums has been remarkably unprejudiced, making the book a comfortable reading. However, among all the categories of white women dealt with in this book, none can afford to forget those disputed 'memsahibs' – wives of the planters, the bureaucrats, largely depicted in literature and pictures as brave, long-suffering, or racist, stupid, who ensnared the natives with their coquetry, and lost the British their Empire. Jayawardena's book does not deal with them.

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