

Women in Purdah: Representation of Indian Women in Women's Travel Writing in Colonial India

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Abstract: Representation of Indian women is one of the most significant aspects of nineteenth century travel writing. The purdah (seclusion) aroused great curiosities among colonizers and was often the subject of numerous fantasies and speculations. Almost all the women travel writers in their narratives have extensively discussed the secluded life of Indian women. As women had privileged access to Indian households, their values were of paramount significance in forming popular opinion about women in India. In fact, stories of the harems are the most desired information in most travel writing of the nineteenth century. This paper is an attempt to look at the projection of life of Indian women in the harem by women travel writers in Colonial India, that is, to study the trajectories of everyday life that both these writers highlights in their travelogues. The texts chosen for analysis are — Anne Elwood's *Narratives of a Journey Overland* (1830), Fanny Parks' *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in search of the Picturesque* (1850), and Mary Billington's *Woman in India* (1895).

Keywords: Representation, Harem, Seclusion, Women's Travel writing, Colonial India

I

The aim of this paper is to examine the representation of Indian women in the zenana in women's travel writing in colonial India. British women working as journalists (for example Mary Billington), tourists (for example Fanny Parks), social reformers (for example Mary Carpenter), missionaries (for example Sara Tucker) as well as those in the roles of mothers, wives, daughters and sisters played an important part in establishing and forwarding the imperial project and in writing about that project from their own different perspectives. It is noteworthy that the gender of the author plays a vital role in shaping the way s/he views foreign culture. The purdah aroused great curiosities among colonizers and was often the subject of numerous fantasies and speculations. With women alone having access to the zenana, their writings became an important source of information about zenana life. For the British women travel writers, one of the most remarkable aspects of Indian women's lives was its preoccupation with the purdah, which was subject to numerous fantasies, curiosities and myth-making, creating a divide between the observers and the observed. Almost all the western women travel writers have included discussions on the life of Indian women in a zenana/harem. The texts chosen for analysis are — Anne Elwood's *Narratives of a Journey Overland* (1830), Fanny Parks' *Wanderings of a*

Pilgrim in search of the Picturesque (1850), and Mary Billington's *Woman in India* (1895). Anne Elwood came to India in 1825 with her husband, Colonel Charles Elwood, of the East India Company's Bombay Army. Fanny Parks was the wife of Charles Crawford Parks, a civil servant in the East India Company. They came to India in 1822. Mary Frances Billington was a journalist, who was sent to India by *The Daily Graphic* in 1893 to know the condition of women in India. It is argued in this paper that patriarchal and feminist ideologies greatly influenced the representation of Indian women in nineteenth century travel writing. There was much pressure on the women writers to provide details of activities in the zenana, which was accessible only to the women. These representations serve to satisfy the curiosities of a wide readership back home, who are fascinated with the exotic depictions of life in the Orient. These representations are not truthful accounts of the real picture; rather these are creations of the writers. There are ambivalences in such representations, which also questions the authenticity of such narratives. It is assumed that women travel writers describe the lives of Indian women in the zenana in conformity with already established convictions, such as erotic zones or as spaces where women are victims of a male-dominated society. Despite the differences observed by them, they depict what they want to see and how they want to see. However, it is important to find out the politics of such representations. Of the multiple and heterogeneous practices that shaped Indian women's lives, the zenana has always been singled out in eighteenth and nineteenth century English travel and literary writings to function as definitive tropes of Indian femininity as oppressed and decadent. British women travel writers to India are entrusted with the responsibility of providing detail information on 'authentic' accounts of the insides of the zenana. However, critics have often questioned the authenticity of representations of Indian women produced in women's travel writing throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For instance, Shampa Roy, in her study "Inside the Royal Zenanas in Colonial India: Avadhi and Other Begums in the Travel Accounts of Fanny Parks" (2012), talks about the politics of representation of colonized women in travel writing. As she says: "Given the popular and entrenched tradition of associating the Orient with its *zenanas* and the immense curiosity and anticipation about accounts of zenanas that inevitably surrounded women-authored travel accounts in the Eastern colonies, it became *de rigueur* for British women travelling in India to devote long sections of their writings to 'authentic' accounts of the insides of the zenanas even when they saw and interacted with several such Indian women who did not spend their lives within the confines of such quarters" (Roy, 52). It is obvious that the travel writers have been persuaded by the readers' immense curiosities and anticipations about accounts of zenana to provide detailed accounts of the lives in the zenanas. Indira Ghose says as

much: "As regards the travel narratives of women travelers, their encounters with the other woman were structured by the cultural norms and the ideological forces at work at the time. From their accounts we learn more about the fantasies of the viewers than about the material realities of the zenana" (Ghose, 55). Thus, colonial ideology operates in the representation of Indian women and the women travel writers produce sensational pictures of the other in order to satiate the reader's various curiosities about lives in the Orient.

However, it should be noted that in India the zenana system was not a universal social practice. The conventions of the zenana were restricted to certain classes and regions. It was seen mainly among the upper and middle classes of the North, North western and Eastern India and mostly in the places where Mughal influence was most direct and sustained. But in majority of the western women's travel writings, this aspect of secluded life is generalized to all Indian women and pictures of Indian women's degradation is largely emphasized. Some writers even upheld the view that Indian women have been so accustomed to a life of inferiority and seclusion that even the introduction of Christianity cannot restore them to their true position (A.U. cited in Janaki Nair's "Uncovering the Zenana" pp 15). Moreover, Janaki Nair in her study "Uncovering the Zenana" (1990) states: "The stubborn, unchanging zenana, a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference, provided a site for the prolongation of the colonial project, which, given the circumstances, would never be accomplished" (Nair, 24). By presenting themselves as rescuers of Indian women from oppressive social practices, they also justified the need for their continued presence in India. With this theoretical background, this paper is an attempt to examine the representation of Indian women in the zenana in women's travel writing and to see the various factors that act upon the production of knowledge by the Western women travel writers. However, it should be mentioned that in women's travel writing, we do not find a uniform account of the secluded space of the zenana, whereas some women have talked about these spaces as oriental despotism, there are some others who have viewed these spaces as mundane realities. There are gradual changes among the women traveller's attitude to these secluded spaces of Indian women's life. In fact, with the emergence of the 'New Woman' in England at the end of the nineteenth century, a further variation in the image of the Indian woman is to be observed. For the later travelers like Mary Billington, Anne Wilson etc., the Indian woman is not a silent victim of oppressive social practices. The image of the meek and docile Indian women produced in Billington's text seems to uphold the same view propagated by the late nineteenth century imperialists in India. For instance, as historians Francis Hutchins and others discuss, when the British mission to convert the Indians into Christianity failed, some Englishmen insisted to keep the traditional values of India intact for the best interests of Britain. To quote Hutchins:

In the later years of the century a very different point of view emerged which sought to demonstrate the validity of the traditional Indian way of doing things. Instead of studying how to reconcile Indians to Western concepts – whether it should be by education or force – some Englishmen now talked of what was required by “an Oriental country like India.” Almost all Englishmen partook of this perspective to an extent... (Hutchins, 153).

Billington's text too supports such a view regarding the British policy of reform in India. Her text seems to sustain the view that the Indians do not need moral and political change.

II

In most regions of India, upper class families continued this purdah system, irrespective of their religion. Access to this world of women was available to English women alone, which was the sole reason of the curiosities of men to know the secrets of zenana life. However, towards the later part of the century, access took the form of the occasional purdah visits to the homes of Indian women by memsahibs. In fact, the missionary women frequently visited the zenanas, at first to educate the secluded women and later, as part of the Female Medical Aid Programme. To ameliorate the conditions of secluded women was the driving force behind much of the missionary rhetoric of the nineteenth century. Across the range of nineteenth-century women's writing about the harem, there are recurring patterns. Significantly, the stories of Indian women depicted in women's travel writing display a large degree of plurality. Majority of the women travel writers have criticized the zenanas as spaces of highly sexualized zones, but there are also writers like Mary Frances Billington, who has viewed the zenana as a mundane, middle-class domestic set-up, rather than a lurid site of oppression and female victimization. She describes the zenana as a “rather dull” place, but certainly not a place of suffering. Instead, she finds it preferable to the loneliness suffered by modern, working women in England. She also cites the native women's views on purdah and shows that they do not consider it as a binding upon them. We can see the following patterns of zenanas reflected in women's travel writing in colonial India- the zenana as a physical space, as a female space, as a political space and also as an ideological construct.

The Zenana as a physical space: British travel writers to India stirred readers' imagination with stories of the lives of heathen women in the zenana and constructed a negative picture of the purdah as an oppressive system. These women are also often depicted as idle, residing in the dark, damp and the unhealthiest part of the house. For instance, describing one of her visits to the female chamber of the Sattara Ranis, one famous travel writer of the nineteenth century, Helen Mackenzie in her travelogue *Six Years in India* (1853) says: “The king conducted us through one or two low rooms with curtains instead of doors, to a mean apartment, long, low and dark, where the ranis sat” (Mackenzie, 30). Another travel writer, Anne Elwood mentions: “The zenana, of which so

much has been said, and of which Burke, I think, gives so flowery and poetical a description, was a small dark apartment, with unglazed windows closed by wooden shutters" (2: 222-23). Thus the zenana is portrayed as an unhealthy place, where the Indian women are doomed to suffer. These passages also deconstruct the romantic descriptions of zenanas produced by male writers as picturesque. Further, Fanny Parks reports her visit to a rich man in Calcutta in the following way:

I was invited to a nach at the house of an opulent Hindu in Calcutta, and was much amused with an excellent set of jugglers ... at the conclusion, the baboo asked me if I should like to visit his wives and female relatives. He led me before a large curtain, which having passed I found myself in almost utter darkness: two females took hold of my hands and led me up along flight of stairs to a well lighted room, where I was received by the friends and relatives... I was glad to see a zenana, but much disappointed; the women were not ladylike; but, be it remembered, it was only at the house of a rich Calcutta native gentleman. (1: 59-60).

To Parks, these worlds of women are dark spaces, where the women are destined to lead their lives. She is unhappy because of the lack of feminine sublimity among the inmates of the zenana. But she leaves the matter in the hope of seeing a real zenana in the future.

The Zenana as a Female Space: Describing one of her visits to the zenana of a Jahreja at Bhooj, Elwood states: "... we were escorted through several courts that led to the women's chambers...where stood the Ranee... she received us most courteously, and with as much grace as an English princess could have done. Her costume was a handsome saree, much worked with gold, and her arms, ankles and throat were loaded with gorgeous bangles and necklace of pure gold" (223). Again she declares: "I flatter myself that in the sameness and tedium of a zenana life, we must indeed have been a considerable amusement, and have afforded the fair inhabitants topic for conversation for a long time afterwards" (225). Her remarks point out to the gossip that prevails in the zenanas, as she thinks, her visit may have provided them ample source of discussion among the inmates of the zenana. Fanny Parks reveals yet another image of the zenanna, she describes these spaces as places of intrigue, where woman constantly try to plot against the others. She cites a comment from Colonel Gardner: "Nothing can exceed the quarrels that go on in a zenana, or the complaints the begums make against each other; a common complaint is such a one has been practicing witchcraft against me" (1: 453). Her description presents the zenana as a space of intrigue and policy among women.

The Zenana as Ideological Construct: The zenana exists in the colonial imaginary as a mixture of fantasy and pleasure. In fact, numerous travel accounts both by men and women describes these secluded places in terms of their own fantasies. However, it should be noted that when the traveler's expectations to see exotic pictures in the

zenanas are not satisfied, they create sensational narratives based on speculation and fantasy. For instance, the following passage by Parks gives such an impression:

The building that most interested me was the royal Zenana Ghar. At certain times the Emperor of Delhi used to retire to this spot with all his ladies...his amusement was to watch the sports of the ladies of the zenana, as they jumped from the roof of the verandah into the water below, and then came up to jump in again. On the other side is another tank, with a sloping bank of masonry; on this slope the ladies used to sit, and slide down into the tank...During these sports, guards were stationed around, to prevent the intrusion of any profane eye on the sacredness of the zenana. (2: 208)

The description in the passage is wrought with the author's imagined picture of a zenana. The passage renders these women into types rather than individuals. Indira Ghose remarks that: "The buildings Parks describes are all ruins- the sport she so lovingly describes are all products of her fantasy" (Ghose, 57). Parks' attempt to provide an exotic picture of the zenana thus voices the romantic tradition of viewing the zenana in fantastic terms. In such writings the zenana is stereotyped as a domain, where beautiful, indolent Eastern women languish under the despotic rule of their Oriental masters/ husbands. As such, these spaces are projected as an imagined site of feminine oppression as well as a fantasy zone of uninhibited free play of erotic desires. Women's travel writing thus catered the need of knowing the inner picture of harem life. To cite one example, Fanny Parks' travel account, for instance, refers to its containing 'revelations of life in the zenana' with the word 'revelations' indicating her aim of the laying bare of mysteries and complexities associated with these forbidden spaces. Moreover, when Parks receives an invitation from Colonel Gardner to visit a zenana, her excitement is noteworthy. As she cries: "Was not this delightful? All my dreams... were to be turned into reality. I was to have an opportunity of viewing life in the zenana, of seeing the native ladies of the East, women of high rank, in the seclusion of their own apartments, in private life..." (1: 378). In this context, it is important to note what motivates/excites Parks to visit these zenanas. As she mentions: "The perusal of Lady Mary Wortley Montague's work has rendered me very anxious to visit a zenana, and to become acquainted with the ladies of the East" (1: 59). Parks' excitement is perhaps to the fact that now she possesses the knowledge of the hidden mysteries of Indian women's life, which she can offer to her readers back home. The pleasure Parks derive is also from the fact that she is able to play the role of empire builders, thus helping in the production and dissemination of knowledge about the other. She provides the readers the most sought for information of oriental images of lascivious native, as she describes the zenana in the following words: "... never was any place so full of intrigue, scandal and chit- chat as a zenana" (1: 450). She further relates that 'science has not yet entered the confines of the zenana; nature and superstition reigns supreme' (1: 453). Thus Parks

places the zenana in a timeless presence and confers upon it all the stereotypical assumptions that characterize much of colonial writing in the early nineteenth century. India still remaining in the primitive state of existence is emphasized further by Leonowens in the following words: "India is still what it was in the Vedic period, a land of peasant classes; she still invokes, as did the ancient Aryans in the Rig Veda... the Hindu today lives, as did his forefathers, close to the heart of nature, deifying the mountains, streams, woods..." (5). She also points out that the three major problems to be solved by the British in India are- to remove the barriers of caste, to free the Indian women from the bondage of customs and the protection of children from various native influences (Leonowens, 138). Again Elwood refers to the restrictions imposed upon the Indian women in the following terms, where she depicts the life of a ranee in the Jarejah's zenana: "...though from etiquette never allowed to leave her zenana, yet she appeared quite *au fait* at all the gossip, and even scandal of the English camp... (224). The reference here is that the inmates of the zenana are never allowed to go outside their secluded spaces.

Another important dimension/ aspect of the depiction of Indian woman is demonstrated by the later travel writers like Mary Frances Billington, Anne Wilson and others, who came to India in the late nineteenth century. These travel writers does not view the condition of Indian women as pathetic and downtrodden. Rather they have viewed the Indian women as liberated like her Western counterpart. As Billington proclaims: "And if I can only convince some of those who vote away blithely, in a confidence profound as their ignorance, upon matters which are grave as issues of life and death to our Eastern fellow-subjects of the Crown, that Indian women are not altogether in such pitiful plight as some of their so-called friends come and tell us" (xvii). She also says: "... and life as I saw in the zenanas was simply rather dull, with few distinctive features of romance, hardship, or heroism about it" (xvi). Again she denies the reports of the immorality of Indian women and claims that they are as moral as Englishwoman. She remarks: "I am quite certain that if all present zenana restrictions were withdrawn, the Indian female population would stand woman for woman upon quite as high a platform as ourselves in this direction" (123). She presents herself as a sympathetic well wisher of the Indian women, but her writing indicates ideological motivations behind such representations. Her text seems to sustain the view that the Indians do not need moral and political change. The image of the meek and docile Indian women produced in Billington's text also seems to uphold the same view propagated by the late nineteenth century imperialists in India.

All such descriptions render a picture of Indian civilization as degraded and decadent. These representations in turn have fuelled the missionary zeal, which have become a political issue and helped in the proliferation of missionaries to India to help uplift the downtrodden Indian women.

The 'rescue' of the Indian women from the oppression of her own men in fact helped in justifying the need for their continued presence in India. Above all, in all these depictions of Indian women's life in the harem, the tendency to patronize or to stress the alterity of the Other is very much obvious in these travel writings. Moreover, as Ghose and other critics have talked about, these travel accounts have served another function, that is, the self definition of the Western women. As Indira Ghose remarks: "Women's travel accounts of Indian women contributed to this image of Indian womanhood and served a further function — namely that of self-definition for the Western woman. By defining the other as backward, English women were able to define themselves as emancipated, civilized and rational creatures. The battles of feminism were also fought on the battleground of the zenana. And here the Indian woman fulfilled the function of the 'self-consolidating other'" (Ghose, 61). Thus the Indian woman is represented in women's travel writing as a counterfoil to the Western women. While they are the 'other' to the self on the one hand, they are also women—which draws a parallel between both the categories of women; but they are viewed as inferior to the Western women.

III

The zenana was the privileged space for the Western women, from where they can produce new knowledge of the colonized to the readership back home. What is depicted and represented is always from the Western women's viewpoint and as such, what emerges finally from such descriptions is a web of constructions. All these portrayals emphasize what Gayatri Spivak has defined as that of 'white women saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak, 296). Such representations of Indian women in turn serve an ideological function, that of supporting British policy in terms of social reform. Thus all these policies of reform also emphasize the inadequacy of the Indian men to take up responsibility for it, to protect their own womenfolk. Moreover, the success of colonization also largely depended on the conversion of natives into Christianity. While the zennana remained out of the reach of the imperialists, educating the women of the zenanas was a serious responsibility entrusted upon the British women. It was through education of the women in the zenana that gradual change could be accomplished and Indians could be convinced of the virtues of colonialism. Under such circumstances, what the Indians need is a paternalistic power that can bring civilization and development. Consequently, these travel writings manifest the British women's complicity with the empire. Thus the depiction of Indian women's life in the zenanas has been very influential for British women travel writers to justify the British rule in India.

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