

Women under Erasure and Reassertion of the Hindu Patriarchal Gender Polarity: a Study of the Late 19th and the Early 20th Century Social Reform Movements

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Abstract

This paper unearths the way the late nineteenth and early twentieth century social reform movements and related contestations have endeavoured to (re)assert, (re)sanction and (re)claim male supremacy, male dominance on the one hand and on the other hand ventured to prolong Hindu women's dependence, marginalization and the perennial subdued life. Women's life, role and social status had been what Derrida calls, "under erasure". On the one hand, it has been accepted to exist with equal honour, respect, right and dignity on par with the men in the society and at the same time their dependence on male, marginalization and secondary position has always been practised. Subsequently this play of acceptance and denial has helped patriarchy to persist women's lifelong subdued status and role.

Keywords: under erasure, quasi-emancipation, reform from within, assenting voices of dissent, women as site, white woman's brown burden

Maharashtrian Hindu males (liberals and extremists), and the British accommodated and adjusted the social reformsⁱ pertaining to the women's emancipation to include them in the matrix of the renewedⁱⁱ patriarchy, family system, male-female relationship (B.G. Tilak, 1975, argues "every educated middle class man wants his wife to be literate and well trained in household duties, to spend her leisure hours reading religious texts in order to improve her mind, and to help in domestic duties"), and the social norms and beliefs. They have reconstructed gender roles, and status, the male-female relationship at the private and public sphere, and in so doing curtailed the actual emancipation. During the social reforms and the national struggle for the political independence in Maharashtra between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, women of Maharashtra had been merely "the site, and neither the subject and nor the object" (Lata Mani, 1998.), of the major contestations and articulations of the social reform. They had been diverted and (mis)led in the name of the social reform activities. The British government used them for political and administrative gains, while the British women imparted it's the "white woman's [brownⁱⁱⁱ] burden" (Antoinette Burton, 1992.) by educating and converting their racially and culturally inferior oriental being through. Hindu conservative male extremist-nationalists sought to contain, accommodate and pacify middle class educated Hindu women into the renewed patriarchy and family system. Hindu male liberal reformer-nationalists used Hindu woman's cause to suit their quasi-reform thoughts- which (un)consciously did not let the emancipation happen altogether at the cost of male ego. In order to make profit out of the "emancipation mission" the three-fold (re)presentations and contestations popped up in the

name of liberating women from the clutches of the age-old Hindu social evils. Therefore what lied at the heart of these contestations, articulations and the social reform movements is the continuous play of acceptance and denial of reform in the status and the role of women in the society. That is to say women were what Heidegger calls "sous rature" and to which Derrida calls as constantly "under erasure": that is "inadequate yet necessary" (Madan Sarup, 1993.) which is paradoxical or self-undermining, rendering their meaning undecidable (Taylor, 2001).

This paper problematizes and deliberates the very essence of reformers', revivalists', and the British (male/female) contestations and articulations on "[the] Hindu women's emancipation during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century Maharashtra", the way these reforms and contestations put the women under erasure to ensure their dominance, supremacy and the upper hand in the Hindu patriarchal society on the one hand and on the other hand to keep women under the impression that these movements and contestations are the genuine efforts of these representatives.

(Re)Presentation of Women: Articulations and Contestations

In order to facilitate the British administration in India, they sought "to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern- a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay, 1835.). Western education replaced Indian learning system (which was limited to the upper castes) and was accessible to all the citizens of India irrespective any caste, class and gender. Impregnated with the wide range of Western thoughts like humanism, equality, fraternity, freedom and the like, male scholars of India partook in the social reforms pertaining to the degraded life of lower castes and women of Hindu religion. Inundated with the social reform and willingness to emancipate Hindu women from the degraded life given by the age-old traditions, customs and laws of Indian society two categories of social reformers came into existence. Two categories of social reformers^{iv}-namely, "preached and practiced" and "preached but acted upon partially" - articulated and contested in favour of social reforms against whom the political reformers^v on the one hand earnestly devoted their life to the political gains and on the other, in the anti-social reform activities who believed in the age-old social norms and system of Hindu lifestyle.

At the very outset it would be pertinent to begin with the mostly articulated phenomenon "emancipation" which manifested under the carpet of nationalism throughout Maharashtra. Ironically in the name of emancipation, overwhelmed by the nationalist and social reformist obsession, both social reformist and the revivalist nationalists politicized and exploited the term to slow down the undermining process of existing social, cultural, and political structure by replacing it as quasi-emancipation or felt-emancipation. They allowed slight modifications to happen but not at the cost of male dominance and ego. They let it happen within the matrix of the age-old socio-cultural codes, rules and norms. This was the major weapon that the male reformers and nationalists exercised by sidelining the actual social reform and by merely putting women at the site of the nationalism. The underlying male hypocrisy can be evidently captured when Gopalrao Joshi in the guise of quasi-emancipation boasted "[a]ll the education she can boast of, has been imparted by me in various ways. And I think I may take the credit for that. She, never in life, attended a school. All the schooling she has had is home-schooling and my society." (Joshi,1992).

The postponement of social reform incepted on the advice of Charles Bradlaugh, British member of parliament who ignited Pandita Ramabai to induct Indian National Congress 1889

along with fellow women. Despite Justice Ranade's denial regarding the women's political participation in the name of "conditions were *not yet*"^{vi} favourable for women's political participation" (Kanitkar, 1953.), Maharashtra women participated in it. Furthermore the death of Mr Ranade and K T Telang's argument confined women's political and social emancipation within the male sphere, argued to nullify women's resistance by reconfirming Hindu woman's birth within the improved household work. This contestation was furthered by Tilak who almost sacked social reforms in Maharashtra. The nub of the matter is whether it was social reformers like Mr Ranade or Telang or anti-social reformer like Tilak from "not yet" to "not at all" delayed complete social reforms, allocated them limited space at the public and reconfirmed the age-old status and role within the matrix of the new domestic private sphere.

Much debated issue across the nation in general and in the region of Bombay Presidency was the Rakhmabai case^{vii} which combined with the controversy over the Age of Consent case triggered unwelcoming and rather outrageous responses. In both the cases, the Age of Consent had been extended from the 09 to 11 or 13 or the time of a girl's coming to age. But the stunning consequences sanctioned authority to the anti-reformers who tried to prove the reformers wrong and upheld their tagline "the present time are not ripe for the social reforms advocated" (*The Marhatta*). They criticized the reform pertaining to instilling "all [Western] education [among the Hindu women] if it so hardens a Hindu girl's heart [through the example of Rakhmabai pointing out at the Western education and Educated Hindu girls in general] as to leave her husband to the aches and pains of disease, herself flying to her piano for the enjoyment of pleasure or to her Milton and Shakespeare for the enlightenment of her mind" (*The Mahratta*). In addition to that the conservative Hindus like Mandlik and Tilak threatened white men who passed the judgment in favour of Rakhmabai which shook the age-old Hindu beliefs. *Kesari*^{viii} intimidated white men by inconsiderate expressions like "if this principle, introduced by the learned *acharya* [emphasis in original] Pinhey [judge of Bombay Presidency court who gave verdict], who is well versed in the *dharma-shastras*[emphasis in original], is applied in practice, the *fifteen or twenty crore* [emphasis is mine] Hindu people living at present in India will have to divorce their wives this very day".

Kosambi in her *Crossing Threshold* (2011) contends that "Rakhmabai's plea for British mediation could be, and was, construed as a brown woman's appeal to white men to continue to *save brown woman from brown man*"^{ix}. Had white men's intention been "to save brown woman from brown man", they would not have reverted their erstwhile judgment favouring Rakhmabai, and passed it next time against her to please and nullify "fifteen or twenty crore" Hindu people's anguish. With the fear of losing their reign in India and to avoid any upstart riot like 1857 the white men willingly passed an unjust verdict. They represented Hindu women erroneously by making Rakhmabai merely the site of the case in particular and Hindu women in general in other cases like this for instance widow marriage, abolition of Sati.

On the other hand liberal reformers showed little support to the Rakhmabai who rather opposed "to validate women's experiences and their inability to overcome moral anxiety generated by a woman unyoking herself from the social control inherent in marriage" (Kosambi, 2011). Reasons for reformers' conviction regarding Hindu woman's "not yet" (reformers tagline to avoid woman's participation into any public interference) direct involvement in social reform and political battlefield can be overtly seen in this case when reformers like K T Telang who never opposed child marriage. Even Gopalrao Joshi- Anandibai's reformer husband- defied the same movement (of child marriage) to defend the glory of Indian culture and the custom of child marriage. To nullify the radicality and the intensity of the case reformers like Justice Ranade though ostentatiously supported Rakhmabai, sidelined and ignored the roots of the case and its

conviction. On the other hand they tried to persuade the public attention through locating their focus on the issues like social morality and code of conduct, for instance Mr Ranade (1887) in *Indu Prakash* marked

“If suits for restitution have been few and far between it is not because of the existence of Section 260 of the Code of Civil Procedure but because of the *moral sense of the community*^x which has from ages past held that it is barbarism to compel two people. By direct or indirect means, to live together when they cannot agree.”

Justice Ranade opposed child marriage and propagated and defended widow remarriage. However, one of the leading figures Mr Ranade at the Third Social Conference held in Bombay, preferred marrying to a child of 11 years young Ramabai after the death of his first wife. His new wife was 21 years younger than him. Had the Widow Remarriage Act 1856 been prominently advocated by the social reformers like Justice Ranade why did he marry a young girl of 11 and not a widow or a physically and mentally grown woman who is not a child?

Here Kosambi's (2011) comparison “[t]his was yet another instance of the discursive power game aptly described in the context of the sati debate in Bengal by Lata Mani, where women were ‘neither the subject nor the object, but the site’ of the debate” suits the educated middle class Hindu males of Maharashtra. Because neither the reformers nor the anti-reformers bothered about the Rakhmabai and the case of female's age of consent; what happened to her after the court trial and imprisonment^{xi}? How did she live after that? Whether married or not or lived married but single life without marrying to another man? How did her husband live after the case? Married or not? And also whether she lived a widow's life after her accuser husband's death who got married to another woman after Rakhmabai's imprisonment though she was alive? To put it the other way, instead of indulging around Rakhmabai's betterment or the betterment of the women facing early age marriage problems and its consequences, nineteenth century intellectual men indulged in probing their earlier pro or anti-reform stances pertaining to the social reform. That summarizes how they cashed on their quasi concerns pertaining to the Hindu women's emancipation and related pertinent social reformatory issues and cases.

Assenting Voices of Dissent: Women Parroting Men

Meera Kosambi in *Crossing Threshold* (2011) contends, “Kashibai Kanitkar... encouraged women's education and strove to legitimize it by preserving the *image of educated women as good wives and mothers with impeccable conventional credentials*^{xiii}”. Kosambi forgot to ponder on the pertinent question- why did the female reformers of Maharashtra repeat and reiterate male words? Female reformers knew that the Indian social values, customs, rituals and culture in general, revolve around the concepts like ‘ideal image of women’, ‘women being good wives and mothers’, and ‘women being well equipped with conventional or traditional credentials’. In order to get accepted and accommodated, modern women assented, dissented and parroted their male counterpart and in that process (un)wittingly contributed to the reconfirming and the remaking of the age-old patriarchy, family system and the social system. Their assenting dissent through reconfirming what their husbands said consequentially trapped them into the new forms of patriarchy. For instance- Anandibai Joshi in a letter (1884) to her husband says,

“[i]t is not at all my intention to distress your dear heart or to cause a rift in our love by raking up old memories... It is very difficult to decide whether your treatment of me was good or bad. If you ask me, I would answer that it was both... Hitting me with broken pieces of wood at the tender age of ten, flinging chairs and books at me and threatening to

leave me when I was 12, and inflicting other strange punishments on me when I was 14- all these were too severe for the age, body and mind at each respective stage... But I am quite content now.” (Joshi “Letters”^{xiii})

The old memories are quite common to most of the Hindu women (reformer as well as common) who suffered domestic violence at the hands of their (il)literate husbands. Ironically male reformers, who crusaded against age-old traditions laid down by lawmakers like Manu, never let go the male dominating privileges.

Most of the male reformers earlier supported Pandita’s social reform zeal but once she converted into Christianity they not only took back their support but also promoted their wives to stay away from her and persuaded them to create counterforce. For example- Ramabai Ranade was compelled to found a *Sadan* for the Brahmin widows as counterforce to the Pandita Ramabai’s *Sharada Sadan*. On the other hand, though Anandibai craved to be with Pandita and her *Sharada Sadan*, her husband compelled her to visit Mrs Ranade’s *Sadan*. In order to pacify Pandita’s staunch dissent against male efforts of social (quasi) emancipation and also to control her revolutionary steps such as eradication of social injustice, women’s subordination and degraded life, both Justice Ranade led Social reformists faction and Tilak led political faction had supported Pandita’s counterforce and insisted Maharashtrian women to follow, and to be inspired by ideal Hindu women like Mrs Ranade. They supported Mrs Ranade because of her pro-patriarchy, pro-male domination and little harmful social reformatory actions who was of opinion,

“a woman’s true commitment is to abstain from causing hurt to her husband, at any time, in any manner. This should be her desire unto death, and her policy in all things, great and small. This is a woman’s true marital blessedness [*soubhagya*] and her sacred vow [*vrata*].” (Ranade,1953.)

G K Gokhale, the political heir of Mr Ranade praises Mrs Ranade that “she devoted herself to the service of her husband and considered herself blessed in doing so... in spite of the new education [i.e. Western], novel ideas [imparted by her reformer husband], and changing circumstances [quasi emancipation] which have provided a new direction to her thoughts and way of life” (Gokhale, Foreword^{xiv}, 1953.). B G Tilak editor of journal *Kesari* openly praised Mrs Joshi, “who lives in the shadow of her husband and does not transgress the boundary of the world that is appropriate for the female community, to offer a few words of advice to others in the light of her own understanding”. *The Marhatta* too praised Anandibai because she had followed Hindu rituals and traditions strictly while staying with the Christian people in the US to study medicine. She did not embrace Christianity like Pandita. And in the case of Mrs. Ranade Tilak faction held her not only as the ideal Hindu woman but also as the perfect example of a true wifehood who followed her husband’s words rigorously. To cut the long story short, neither social reformers nor the political reformers entertained women partaking in social reforms, women’s emancipation and the upliftment of women’s socio-cultural status. When Pandita tried to do so, she had been nullified and outcast by them. And on the other hand they supported, allowed and hailed those women parrots who assented without dissenting, without hurting male ego and without rupturing the male dominance and female subordination.

Women being neither the Object nor the Subject but the mere Site of the Debate

Hindu women had been brought into play at the hands of both the factions- liberals and extremists. The liberals strove for a better society free from all the social taboos, inequalities and evils, and extremists tried to gain the political independence. But both the factions never let go of their male chauvinism and domination. For the social and political benefits of the Hindu male's chauvinism their contention was that indicatively only men can discuss and persuade a Hindu woman whether to partake in the national struggle for independence or not, if they are to, then in what ways and the like which will be discussed in a while. Though equipped with Western Humanism and the education male reformers had always kept on dominating their counterpart in every respect for example it was Gopalrao Joshi who wanted his wife Anandibai to learn and take part into the social reform movement but did not allow her to be friends with Pandita Ramabai and her reform activities. Such Hindu male dominating nature put Hindu women and social reforms at the margins and let the male reformers contest over it. To cite another example, reformers Dhondo Karve who "preached as well as practised but partially" social reform at the public and private spaces married a widow from *Sharada Sadan*, Baya Karve. But he did not allow her to work in his schools and *Anatha Balikashrama* despite her willingness and eligibility. The traces of traditional mindset of Hindu male patriarchy is evidently perceptible among the so called social reformers like Mr Joshi and Karve and others, and superiority (that they never discarded Hindu males superiority in terms of gender, education, social, political and economic independence which kept haunting women emancipating first from the clutches of such superiority) remained merely the site and neither the object and the subject at the social and political arena of the nineteenth and the twentieth century Maharashtra.

Had liberals been liberal in the true sense (of the term) and had no issues regarding male dominance and superiority, they would not have been idiosyncratic and would not have victimized their wives by beating and scolding them at home. Women's narratives in the form of letters and biography revealed the way reformers treated badly their wives in order to satisfy their idiosyncratic superego. For instance- female reformer Lakshmibai Tilak speaks of provoking her husband's (N V Tilak) anger by laughing at him after scoring more than him in a game of dice, "[h]er laughter was short-lived for it ended in his pushing her down the stairs, though she was seven months pregnant at the time" (Tilak, 2001.).

Caroline Dall in her biography of Anandibai Joshi in the guise of helping out Mrs Joshi sidelines her and develops a critique of Hindu male's oppressiveness, "Gopalrao's presence in the biography [which] serves the feminist orientalist agenda for he embodies the stereotypical Hindu oppressor-husband" (Kosambi, 2011.). Kosambi too here fails to acknowledge Dall's (1888) critique of stereotype of Hindu oppressor-husband and caters her critique of Dall's agenda. Though Dall's biography serves the so called "feminist orientalist" (Kosambi, 2011.) or "white woman's brown burden" (Burton, 1992.) agenda what lies at the substructure of Dall's argument is the naked truth of Hindu husband's stereotype.

The focal point to mention is that at the heart of Dall's and Kosambi's argument lies the failure of focusing on Hindu woman and (un)knowingly putting her at the site of their contestations. The white woman's brown burden can be observed in the case of Pandita-Geraldine-Manorama trio. Geraldine's "civilizing mission" or "mother Teresa" figure vis-à-vis her association with Pandita Ramabai and Manorama, Pandita's daughter ended up creating Pandita, a half Christian and half Hindu and Manorama, a perfect example of Christianization. For instance- in the case of Pandita Geraldine, Western mother figure of Pandita, for the sake of white woman's Christianizing or civilizing (for British Christianizing was an alternative for the civilizing) mission tempted Ramabai to convert into Christianity, as Geraldine put in her *The*

Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai, “the body of her work was given by America, the soul by her sojourn in the Wantage Community [the Community in England where Pandita lived with her daughter]”, and nurtured young Manorama into a “best product of Christianizing mission”. In case of Manorama the mother-figure competition intensified between Pandita Ramabai, Manorama actual (brown) mother and Geraldine, her white-cum-adopted mother-cum-grandmother. Manorama’s upbringing amalgamated between this double state and she became what Geraldine or Christian missionary intended to make the perfect example of converted Christian which Pandita never became and could not avoid making of Manorama into a Christian. The race between Pandita and Geraldine was to infuse their ideas and ideologies into Manorama and raise her accordingly kept haunting Manorama throughout her life between Indian and Western ways of living. Consequently Manorama had played the role of a mere site in the contest-of instilling Western and Indian ideas and ideologies into the minds and daily life of young Manorama- between Geraldine and Pandita.

Conclusion

To cut the long story short the paper attempted to critique emancipatory moves of-reformers who advocated “not yet”; conservatives who said “the present time are not ripe for the social reforms advocated”; the British Raj who tried “to save brown women from brown men”; and white woman’s who had “orientalist feminist agenda and white woman’s brown burden”. These efforts slowed down the pace of social reforms, kept it lurking and put the Hindu woman at the sight of their debates, articulations, help, and (re)presentation. In addition to that Hindu women reformers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century fell prey to the temptation of quasi or felt emancipation and became the modern educated middle class women victim of newly reconstructed age-old forms of patriarchy, family system and male-female relationship at the public and private spheres.

Notes

ⁱ Here after when I say about the social reforms it is implied that I am talking about the reforms pertaining to the Maharashtrian Hindu women’s emancipation only and not extending my critique towards other social reforms.

ⁱⁱ Nineteenth and twentieth century Maharashtra witnessed huge change in social structure but the age-old concepts of patriarchy, family system, and male-female relationship have been hardly changed. Instead, the same concept have been modified to accommodate modern educated middle class woman and to continue male domination at the private and public spheres seamlessly.

ⁱⁱⁱ Though “white woman’s burden” is by Burton, brown in the squire is Kosambi’s addition which suited to my argument which is why I have incorporated it in my paper.

^{iv} Social reformers in Maharashtra who fall into the category who “preached and practiced” are – Lokhitwadi, Jyotiba Phule, G Agarkar, and the like. Social reformers in Maharashtra who fall into the category who “preached but acted upon partially” are – Justice Ranade, Gopalrao Joshi, Dhondo Karve, N V Tilak, K T Telang, and the like.

^v Conservatives of anti-social reformers are- Chiplunkar, B G Tilak, V N Mandlik, and the like.

^{vi} The emphasis is mine. Because though Kanitkar mentions Justice Ranade's outspoken words for women's participation as not suitable yet, this "not yet" attitude has played a crucial role in denying emancipation to happen in all the fields by the reformers like Justice Ranade. My critique is on their "not yet" attitude.

^{vii} Rakhmabai case goes hand in hand with the case of Age of Consent. Rakhmabai after coming to age (after gaining puberty) declines to cohabit with her husband Dadaji Thakur. Her husband filed a case in Bombay Court demanding her to retribute with him. Firstly Court gives verdict in favour of Rakhmabai but later reverts the judgment and orders Rakhmabai to retribute with her husband or accept imprisonment.

^{viii} Different issues of the journals like *Kesari* (Marathi weekly Pune), *The Mahratta*, (English weekly Poona), and *Indu-Prakashi* (Anglo-Marathi weekly Bombay) have been cited to have a better knowledge of the concerned issues, debates and conservative and liberal views on it. This is why these journals along with their dates and issue numbers have not been mentioned in the list of cited works.

^{ix} Emphasis is mine.

^x Emphasis is added.

^{xi} Refusing restitution Rakhmabai went to jail and remained unmarried after the completion of imprisonment tenure and lived a widows' life when Dadaji Thakur died. On the contrary Dadaji (who did not want Rakhmabai to retribute with him and rather wanted her family members to pay him off some amount instead) asking compensation from Rakhmabai's family members for Rakhmabai's refusal to retribute marries another woman and lives with her till the end.

^{xii} Emphasis is mine.

^{xiii} Anandibai Joshi's "Letters" have found with the Carpenter Family Archive which is they are not included in the list of cited works.

^{xiv} Though the quotation is taken from Mrs Ranade's *Amachya Ayushyatil Kahi Athvani* the statement above mentioned is taken from its Forward which is penned by Gokhale.

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