

Reading the East India Company, 1720-1840: Colonial Currencies of Gender

Betty Joseph

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The task of the book is to read the fragmented and often silent presence of the (Indian) woman in the colonial archive, and Joseph does some splendid archival research to uncover instances of women caught in conflict with the colonial legal and state machinery. There is a desire, however, to at least 'partially recuperate' these women as subjects, and here Joseph's project flounders at times. The recuperation takes the form of having metropolitan women fictional characters of the eighteenth century (like Roxana, Pamela) speak to the odd historical-fictional place that the Indian woman occupies in the colonial archive. While there may be a similarity in the textual operations of historical and fictional determinations, Joseph's analogy (between the 'textual determinations' of metropolitan fictional characters and colonial historical women) works only at the risk of sliding over the differences in the domain (fiction/history, metropole/colony) in which these determinations work. The reinstatement of the subjectivity of the colonial woman is thus, ironically, often done at the expense of this very subjectivity, as a Pamela or a Roxana is made to sympathetically speak for the structural quandary of the subaltern woman.

Apart from this, however, Joseph provides a fascinating account of the workings of the archive and how it makes examples out of specific women. In order to place the woman, who occupies a marginal and often unnamed place in the archive (if at all), at the center of her discussion, Joseph establishes the woman as a "'structural' rather than a 'marginal issue'... [by reading] the importance of sexual difference and sexuality in the very deployment of colonial power." The attention to this difference allows Joseph to not only track the manner in which the figure of the Indian woman shifts in the archive in order to serve the present exigencies of the East India Company, but also enables her to reveal the

archive as not a stable repository of historical events and truths, but as a process of record making that constantly re-writes itself to create present 'truths' about colonial subjects, particularly the colonial woman, in order to legitimize its actions and to gain access to certain spaces. Thus in her discussion of the Rani of Burdwan, a female Zamindar in Bengal, Joseph notes that while in 1774, the Company fostered and worked with an idea of the *zenana* as a 'sacred or legal asylum,' which did not conflict with the female Zamindar's right to, and control of property, in the 1790s, the *zenana* women became symbols of the 'secluded woman,' markers of a despotic system. Now, the *zenana* was conceived not as a legal asylum, but as functioning at the limits of the law; the *zenana* women could not be brought into court, thus failing to meet the pre-condition of the new definition of the legal subject. This new meaning of the *zenana* facilitated the Company policy in the 1790s to actively dispossess female Zamindars by disputing their claim to be proper and full legal subjects. Joseph notes that this shift in the meaning of the *zenana* was not fortuitous but closely followed the Company's exigencies regarding revenue interest. Thus in the 1770s, while working with the female Zamindars was the way for the Company to realize maximum revenue benefits, by the 1790s this situation ceased to be so, as the female zamindars in collusion with their male counterparts were using the protected space and special rights of the *zenana* to get out of certain revenue payments and compulsory sale of property when in default.

This shift of course involved an active re-writing of the earlier rhetoric of the *zenana* as a special inviolate space, to a place, which had to be penetrated in order to bring women into the fold of the law (conceived now as residing in the Court alone and not in different sites). Joseph is at her best in tracking such shifts and

making such connections between historical-fictional 'truths' and historical-commercial 'exigencies.' She makes a similar argument in her reading of the "Woman of Bashwar," a woman who was the subject of a rape/adultery charge at the Company's Fort St. George factory at Madras in 1721. Joseph once again convincingly demonstrates, through a close reading of the legal archive and behind the scenes operations at the Company's headquarters in London, the fictions, lies, and significant absences that went into the making of a legal precedent of the case of the Bashwar woman.

Less convincing is Joseph's attempt to use these women to undo the imperative in the colonial archive to make and re-make these women as 'examples.' This is particularly true in the chapter on the Bashwar woman, where the discussion shuttles back and forth between the interests of Company officials and 'native men,' and the peculiar silence of the Bashwar woman in Joseph's own account is rather glaring. Joseph tries to remedy this in part by making an analogy with Defoe's character Roxana in *Roxana* (1724), but this comes across more like an act of ventriloquism. The silence, left as silence, might have provided a more powerful commentary on the "colonial currencies of gender," than the task of recuperation that Joseph attempts.

On the whole, however, the book, while theoretically unsatisfactory at times, is an excellent read for getting a sense of how the figure of the woman is used in the archive to create historical 'truths.'

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