

## BOOK REVIEW

### “May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons : A Journey Among the Women of India”

Elisabeth Bumiller (New York: Random House, 1990)

Veena T. Oldenburg

**I**N spite of the ink periodically spilled by serious scholars explaining the non-generalizable, historically ever-changing societies and subcultures of India to Western readers, the stereotypes invented in the colonial period (1757-1947) remain hardy perennials that bloom with fatiguing regularity in media representations in the United States. When things look bleak in New York or Washington we are told that these could be the “new Calcuttas.” The obligatory essays on the malnourished children in India’s villages, or the pavement dwellers of Bombay, remind us of true the meaning of homelessness and poverty. Cited always as the most frightening example of a Third World country, India emerges as the single most squalid, sinister, yet exotic place on this planet. But no image has served this purpose more steadfastly than the stereotype of the forlorn and oppressed “Hindoo Woman.” Once cast as a main target of colonialism’s “civilizing mission” in India, she continues to represent the low end of the continuum of human victimhood in media and popular accounts.

Certainly all is not well with India’s approximately four hundred and twenty million women of all ages, castes, creeds, and economic levels, but what is objectionable is the artless reductionism that converts this diversity into a set of static structures that is less than useful. And in the implication that Indian culture mechanically and timelessly produces and reproduces social relationships in which women are its passive

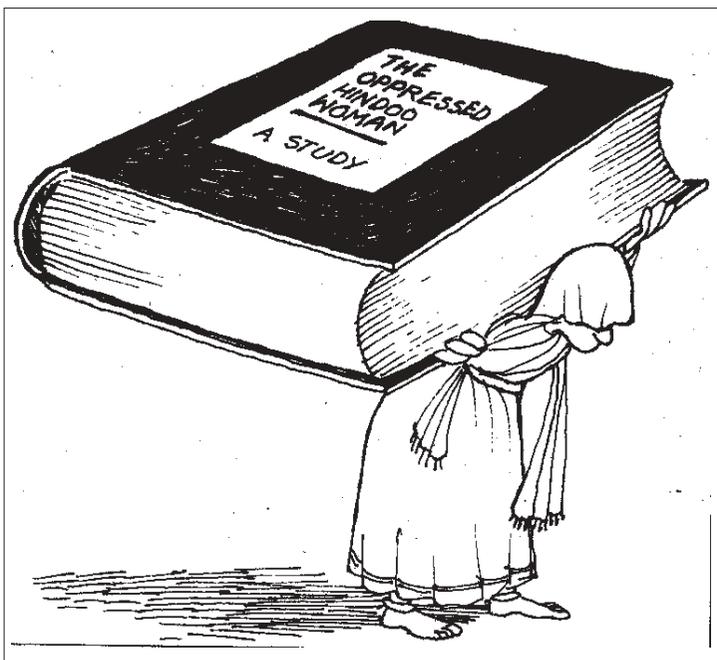
victims it is downright destructive.

This kind of reductive thinking is bolstered by the construction of power and powerlessness as binary opposites so that “other” societies seem to consist only of women as powerless victims and men as their powerful oppressors. It could never explain, for instance, these two contradictory images from recent Indian history: one of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi portrayed on political posters as the invincible Hindu goddess of warfare, Durga, captioned: “Indira is India and India is Indira;” the other, of a young lower middle class woman burnt to death by her in-laws for allegedly not

bringing an adequate dowry. What generalization, what grand theory about gender or power can explain the two images of women in India? And what of the vast continuum of women between these two extremes? There is no simple division of power along gender lines in Hindu society; caste, age, marital status, and economics are some of the variables that have eternally complicated the equation between power and gender.

A closer scrutiny of the cases of the prime minister and the burnt bride is warranted to explain how our suppositions about cultural constraints are stood neatly on their heads. What-

ever her advantages as the daughter of prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi can be construed as the culturally inauspicious one. She was an only child, so male children did not follow in her wake. She married a non-Hindu (her husband Feroze Gandhi, no relative of Mahatma Gandhi, was a Zoroastrian), which, ipso facto, makes a her a social outcast in Brahmanical terms. Worse yet, she became estranged from him and returned, with her two sons, to live in



her father's house. After Feroze Gandhi's death she was technically a widow, since there had been no formal divorce. How did such a woman become perhaps the world's most powerful woman? From being the creature of the men who nominated her as prime minister (because she was Nehru's daughter) in 1966 she consciously shed her male patrons and emerged, by 1971, as the indomitable leader of the largest democracy on earth. She found her strength in indigenous cultural terms, not by espousing modern feminism, but as a woman mobilizing the reservoir of traditional symbols of female power.

The bride, on the other hand, is culturally auspicious. Her potential for motherhood, particularly for producing male children, is the unflinching route to power in a traditional patriarchal family. By middle age she is the decision making center of the household controlling its resources and commanding her sons and daughters-in-law. Yet she is cruelly murdered, and nowhere in the culture or religion, is that countenanced. She is, in fact, the victim of a modern pathology of the custom (dowry) that is not unique to Indian culture, of a modern police indifferent to "domestic" violence, of an encumbered judicial system that acts only reluctantly in cases of domestic crime.

The cultural construction of gender becomes a concept with less explanatory power than we had assumed, and cultural meanings become very elusive indeed. Only one thing is undeniable: there seem to be no bounds on the power or the powerlessness of Indian women. Nor are cultures permanently constituted entities; they respond to material and political changes in society. Power is continuously contested, resisted, and refigured in history and gender relations are a prime example of this contest.

This brings us to an energetic attempt by Elisabeth Bumiller, a reporter for the Style page of the Washington Post, to understand gender in India.

Elisabeth Bumiller's journey among the women of India, seems at first an intrepid field trip, rendered more so if you examine her credentials for this undertaking. How does it happen that a reporter who writes for the Style page of the Washington Post, who had never been particularly interested in India or its cultures and peoples, has read little of its history or sociology, knows none of its many languages except English, had been little moved by feminist issues or even poverty and discrimination in Washington D.C., suddenly devotes herself to writing a book about Indian women? This is not a rhetorical question. At one level it must be asked because such temerity has precedents of the most dubious kind. British memsahibs—those wives and female kin of colonial administrators who mastered only the imperative case in the local language—wrote letters, diaries, and memoirs with unbounded energy to amuse, inform, and shock those back home about the joys and hardships of being part of the British Empire.

They also contributed handsomely to the cultural misunderstandings and racial stereotypes that Imperialism found necessary to invent to legitimize its expansionary conquests and prolong the subjugation and exploitation of an alien people. These accounts were critical in the project to translate profitable and crass imperialism into a credible "civilizing mission" (to appease those back home who objected to British domination of India on moral grounds) and went a long way in entrenching the myths of racial and cultural superiority that live on in the western imagination.

At another and more important level this question is pertinent because some of Bumiller's methods of creating an ahistorical narrative about "the other" are at the heart of the scholarly critique of the production of knowledge on Third World women by U.S. and European scholars. Simply stated, this critique, maintains that the continuing political and economic domination by First World countries of former colonies, now collectively designated the Third world, necessarily shapes and colors western feminist discourse on the "status of women" in other societies and keeps it focussed on the cultural nature of women's oppression. This vantage point invents a generic image of an oppressed "Islamic woman" or "Hindu woman" and is insensitive to regional variations, economic factors, and best of all, ignorant of the history that has transformed cultural meanings in formerly colonized societies. It also posits an equally homogenized "western woman" located in a progressive cultural milieu that makes her an autonomous being who can be the "model" for improving "the other," whose struggle for her own liberation can serve as the blue print for the Third World woman. This critique is not a blanket attack on all western feminists writing about Third World women; only specific works and authors have been carefully indicted. Nor does it make the case that only Third World women can write perceptively and sensitively about themselves. In fact, it has sensitized many feminist scholars to the pitfalls of ethnocentrism, essentialism, and even the opposite—a mindless universalism. This critique has recently found acceptance among western feminist scholars and its influence has begun to percolate into courses on Feminist Theory at western universities. Ought we, then, to exempt "popular" writers and journalists from the standards we set

for scholars when their works have the potential of affecting far greater numbers of readers that will compound and reinforce stereotypes about Indian women rather than explode them?

Elisabeth Bumiller's book on Indian women is elegant and empathetic in parts but in others it is patently an example of the kind of writing and methodology that has drawn fire. In acquainting us with how she persuaded herself to write a book on Indian women, she ignores the warning of her Indian friends, and wilfully becomes a "witness" for prosecution of Indian culture in, Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, the single most brazenly "orientalist" work on India that I know. Katherine Mayo, allegedly an American feminist, was expressly recruited by a defensive colonial government in India in the 1920s, to journey through India to produce a book at least as negatively compelling as her earlier malevolent book on the Phillipines, that would discredit the nationalist movement in India. In *Mother India* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1927) Katherine Mayo surpassed both herself and the zeal of her colonial sponsors. In *Slave of the Gods* (London: Johnathan Cape, 1929), an even more pointed salvo against the cultural treatment of Indian women, Mayo says loudly and clearly what later western feminist authors are ac-

cused of doing more subtly. In a chapter entitled "To the Women of Hindu India" she states: "Your culture, it is true, is under no necessity to satisfy our Western judgment. But until it satisfies that judgment in what we consider essential points of common humanity, it must do without our respect. Until you change the facts, therefore, the verdict [on a cruel and barbaric culture] cannot be different. . .

her work. Mary Daly, in her 1978 book, *Gyn/Ecology* wrote that Mayo 'shows an understanding of the situation which more famous scholars entirely lack. Her work is, in the precise sense of the word, exceptional.' Mayo, in her own way was a feminist, and although her observations often reveal more about her than about India, many of the conditions she reported still exist. . . . Katherine Mayo, egregious as her views were, held a certain fascination for me. She had done, after all, what I was trying to do. [pp.20-22; my emphasis]

Perhaps Bumiller feels more secure in her own task by aligning herself with other western feminists who did what she is doing and by endorsing their disdain for serious scholarship. Mary Daly's attack on non-western cultures is unfortunate and has been duly addressed in "An Open Letter to Mary Daly" by Audre Lord, published in 1984. Bumiller's scant dismissal of Indians (who "revile" Mayo) and her citing Mary Daly's

approval of Mayo adds fresh and unnecessary insult to already profound injury. It also underscores her ignorance of the acrimony sparked by these very authors she admires among western feminists and scholars. Nowhere does Bumiller question Mayo's role or motives as a willing agent of the Raj; colonialism becomes a benign



.The liberty afforded to American women for example, is as great as your thralldom." (p.212) Both of Mayo's books, dense with anger and misperceptions and bristling with vulgar racism, became best sellers. "Sixty years later," writes Bumiller, Indians still revile Katherine Mayo, although, interestingly, there has been an American radical feminist interpretation of

force working relentlessly for the uplift of women's status. She conveniently claims that little has been written about Mayo, again ignoring a very fine and detailed expose of her written by Manoranjan Jha based on Mayo's private papers in the Yale library, or the book reviews that greeted the publication of "Mother India." Mahatma Gandhi, a busy nationalist leader in the late 1920s, was provoked enough to write a now famous review of the book entitled "The Drain Inspector's Report" that would have been useful for Bumiller to have read to put the book in its historical context.

So, unsurprisingly, there are Mayo-style inferences in Bumiller's work. Her coverage of "rural women" is particularly telling and important to review since nearly eighty percent of India's women live in some 600,000 villages. Totally oblivious to serious ethnographic methods, training, or literature, Bumiller makes half a dozen brief trips to Khajuron, a village near Lucknow, in the space of a year. She and her husband are guests in the household of the largest landowner in the village. She admits that her smattering of Hindi is fairly worthless among speakers of the Awadhi dialect. She impresses us with the fact that she survived her brief sojourn in a brick and mud hut, sleeping on a string cot and eating her meals while sitting on a mat on the floor. Through interpreters, she interviewed twenty-five women for a maximum of two hours each. The one interview from which she quotes directly she conducted in the presence of the interviewee's husband, who presumably spoke English, and wound up doing the speaking for his wife.

At the end of this year she reached "two unqualified conclusions" about the effects of gender and caste on village women: "It may be too strident

to say that a woman in Khajuron was either a prisoner or a slave, but whatever one wants to call her, she could never hope to escape from her fate nor determine it herself." [p.79.] They are startling conclusions. Poverty may be a far greater factor than caste or gender to explain the "slave," for poverty shapes culture. Secluded women are far from "prisoners" in their own estimation, a conclusion one finds in several several ethnographies of villages not far from Khajuron. Victor Zorza of the Manchester Guardian warned her that it took him five years to figure out the politics of one village. To gain access to women as they construe themselves, as agents of their own lives and in their own worlds, it would take even longer, and then only if you could communicate with them in their own language.

Out of a single village she extrapolates and conjures up a homogenized larger reality of rural India. All its dull, dusty, changeless tedium is captured in "thick description," reprehensibly uninformed by the work of several scholars, some of them western women, who have worked in villages nearby that might have tempered her conclusions. Instead she generates for the reader the impression that the poverty, dirt, flies, and the "ways of the 1,000 people of Khajuron are the ways of most of humanity [in India]." [p.76] Bumiller's brisk desire to arrive at conclusions on her journey remind me of anthropology's beginnings under the aegis of colonial rule for "places without history", to "observe" people and judge their strange, barbaric, and unchanging ways. Unwittingly she manages to revive the old-fashioned view of "the Indian village" as that quintessentially unchanging place that exists outside of history.

The rest of Bumiller's reportage falls into two broad categories: the spicy vignettes about film stars, ma-

haranis, and other elite women who all speak English eloquently, and serious vignettes about women as victims. The former is her metier and finds Bumiller exuberant, reporting with verve on women who she considers successful: Indira Gandhi, a woman police officer, a writer, painter, and several film actresses. It makes amusing reading. She also covers a wide spectrum of feminist issues and does a laudable job of pulling together the strands of a very fissiparous women's movement in India.

Yet, the sati (widow self-immolation) in Rajasthan, or an alleged "bride-burning," or the story of female infanticide in Tamilnadu, or the abuse of amniocentesis by pregnant middle class women to abort female fetuses, she reports not as modern modern pathologies of a culture but its enduring products. In her view, a single-minded, almost crazy, cultural preference for sons, a thousand sons—(a preference she accepts as a given and never really questions) determines that females as fetuses, infants, brides and widows, must die unnatural, untimely deaths. The story of the colonial political economy that logically deepens this preference for sons remains untold by Bumiller.

What is frustrating and bothersome is that this perception—in which "Indian women" are essentialized as cultural victims—informs this newest book almost as much as the earliest eighteenth century colonial reports on the discovery of a variety of "social evils" in India. For her the colonial period is notable for the discovery of a very benighted culture that dictates who shall live and who shall die. The most spectacular among these "discoveries" was the practice of sati (or "suttee"), widow self-immolation, among their Bengali Hindu subjects; female infanticide, child marriage, polygamy, and purdah quickly fol-

lowed. These scattered regional and local practices described by colonial administrators were woven together to fabricate a master narrative on the seamless tapestry of “Hindu culture” that was heavily retailed in Britain to counteract the often fierce anti-imperialist sentiment in Parliament, and in India to combat the notion that Indians were fit to govern themselves.

Let me substantiate how this “master narrative” colors Bumiller’s work in patches: dowry (chiefly a Hindu practice) as the motive for “bride-burning,” for instance, does not work, as Bumiller herself astutely detects in the case of Surinder Kaur she presents in great detail. The motives for the burning, she concedes, are far more complicated than greed for more dowry; the burns in Surinder’s case might even be self-inflicted. Yet, it is clear that Bumiller pursues this elusive woman because she was the near victim of an alleged “bride-burning.”

Bumiller might have thought of this as an instance of marital violence without any exotic or cultural peculiarities, were it not for the fact that the woman suffered burns. If only Bumiller could have shed the mental baggage that insists on perceiving crimes against women in India as cultural artifact she would have understood better the forces at play. She must know that in America every year more than 1,500 women are fatally injured in domestic violence and about 2.5 million women are victims of robbery, assault, and rape, chiefly by their own intimates. These are grim numbers; more than five thousand women would have to be burned alive and more than eight million assaulted, robbed, and raped in India annually to reach a proportional level of domestic violence against women. What does this tell us about American culture? Since this violence is committed in mundane ways—by shooting,

bludgeoning, strangling, or stabbing—it fails to grip the media’s imagination in quite the same way as Indian bride-burnings or dowry murders do. (Would Claus von Bulow fit the bill of a dowry murderer?) Bumiller makes no comparative statements even though “the American woman” has been an implicit referent in her narrative and is also its implicit reader. I hate to be a spoil sport, but kerosene in middle class Indian kitchens, which is invariably used to douse the victim in these murders, is about as exotic as baseball bats, knives or guns are in American homes. Burning a woman in her kitchen is neither fraught with ritual significance nor culturally sanctioned. It is, forensically speaking, a preferred method because it leaves no clues and can easily be disguised as an accident or suicide, which, alas, do occur. With these sobering facts I rest my case against a cultural whodunit. □