

**WRITING WOMEN INTO HISTORY OF WESTERN INDIA:
NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES**

A

SYNOPSIS

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INTRODUCTION

“... ‘Yes, I am fond of history.’ ‘I wish I were too. I read it a little as a duty; but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so-good-for nothing, and hardly any women at all-it is very tiresome;...”¹

Catherine Morland in Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, 1803.

Catherine Morland's boredom with history depicts disconnectedness with what was considered important by women or 'her story' and what was considered as 'man's history' or 'his-story'. It is true that the history of men has been a history of civilisations, where wars, battles, victors and kings have made it to the mainstream historical discourses. Therefore it is natural to assume that common men as an isolated group had to be written out to give place to elite men and their deeds. Women on the other hand have been excluded in both the cases, either as elite or as common women. The reason for this is that they have not played a significant role in the public spaces.

Narratives 'of' women or 'on' women, in historical writing, so far have been written mostly by men, from the perspectives which they considered were important for women. Hence by and large women as a generic category have been examined as 'semi-humans' unable to speak for themselves. Women are only 'looked at' and have rarely done their 'own looking'. It was probably because women's mundane experiences were not considered noteworthy enough. As Virginia Woolf writes in 'A Room of One's Own' in 1929,

“...What one wants, I thought- and why does not some brilliant student at Newnham or Girton supply it?- is a mass of information; at what age did she marry; how many children had she as a rule; what was her house like; did she have a room of herself; did she do the cooking; would she be likely to have servants? All these facts lie somewhere, presumably, in parish registers and account books; the life of an average Elizabethan woman must be scattered about somewhere,

¹ Widmark, Elisabeth. "Catherine Morland in Jane Austen's" *Northanger Abbey*", an unlikely Gothic heroine." (2011).142.

could one collect it and make a book of it. It would be ambitious beyond my daring ...”²

Women’s experiences came from the lives or the struggles that they faced on a daily basis. Men too faced them but unlike women, they were not to spend their lives in the care of their fathers, brothers, husbands or sons. They were the owners of their little medieval like fiefdoms and hence their decisions were binding to be followed by the serfs or women of the house. Men could be subservient to their superiors, but women had to be slavishly submissive to their men. Thus women had little or no space to themselves neither in their houses nor in histories of the time. If the history of women is traced from pre-historic times, women’s role and their daily routine was considered important as they were the part of milestones of evolution of human civilization. For instance, despite no physical evidence, it can be easily believed that women were pioneers in many fields. For instance, knowledge of fire or invention of the wheel or the knowledge of horticulture’s importance could have been women’s inventions. Unfortunately, despite no evidence proving that these were done by men, such acts have been ascribed to men rather than women. This shows how unfair historical writing has been to women as all the development or progress was believed to have been carried out by men rendering women absent.

The same problem persisted with the beginning of the historical age. Historical age in the case of the Indian subcontinent shows a much advanced civilization in the form of Indus Valley Civilisation. The script of this civilization is yet to be deciphered thus leaving the archeologists and historians to presume that rulers or chiefs were predominantly men. Hence making an unwarranted assumption that women were reduced to act merely as agents of fertility and nothing more. To write women back in such histories looks to be an impossible task for the field on women’s history is fairly new. Gerda Lerner, one of the influential figures in the development of women’s and gender history since the 1960s while beginning her work mentions that

“...When I started working on women's history about thirty years ago, the field did not exist. It was not recognized; people didn't think that women had a history worth knowing....”³

Writing women back presumably is difficult because of lack of records in the archival sources as

² Woolf, Virginia. (1929). *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). In *The People, Place, and Space Reader*, Routledge, 2014. 38.

³ Lerner, Gerda. "Women and history." (1986). *Women and History Part I: The Creation of Patriarchy with Gerda Lerner*". Interview with Jeffrey Mishlove, www.intuitionnetwork.org.

women's achievements were not considered important enough to be mentioned in the public spaces. As can be expected the central domain of women has mostly been private spaces. Therefore their records have been absent from the archival sources, marking their absence from mainstream historical discourse.

Whatever little covers the experience of women has been written in male voices not in female's voice. This has made the historical narrative a tilted one, heavily in favor of male's history. To write women's history or women in history, it becomes important to recognize that women had a strong role to play in shaping the past or influencing both the present and future. Women's perspectives as a mother, a wife, a daughter, a sister, a widow, a grandmother, or an aunt, although absent from archival sources, do find a voice in myriad alternative or non-traditional sources.

Alternative sources such as popular folk tradition do recount the lives of ordinary women and their day to day experiences: their efforts to manage the home front, their sufferings, patriarchal pressure that they face, and their persecutions at the workplace (lower caste women). Folklore and other traditions such as marriage songs often highlight important aspects of women's lives such as their bodies, sexuality, mental health, emotions, love, desires, and dreams etc. For a very long period of time, historical schools did not consider these as authentic historical sources. Yet, recent researches have used the folk traditions of their respective regions to talk about women's lives.

History of the western Indian regions is replete with such instances where women have remained absent in the traditional archival sources but their presence is most prolific in the oral sources or those written sources which were authored by women themselves.

The present study broadly undertakes to bring to light representative and comprehensive history of women in western India. This research besides concentrating on factual details also takes into account experiences of women which were not considered historically relevant. For this purpose, it becomes important to look for them in sources as mentioned above. The study sees women as playing different roles that brought them into the limelight or sometimes by remaining in the shadows they have done something which was a revolutionary step in their own way. They are seen as a force in politics, as a reformer, as revolutionaries; also, as producers of culture and tradition, as researcher, as worker, as artisan, as peasant, as tribal and as domestic worker or in their social role as wives, daughters and mothers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher will apply descriptive, analytical, theoretical and evaluation methods for the study. For this data collected, from the following sources; Published and unpublished Government Records, Reports and Monographs on western India; The Gazetteers and Castes and Tribes Studies; Various literary writing of men and women of western India; Publications and Periodicals, in English and vernacular languages; Oral sources.

By using the sources, the researcher aims at adoption of critical perspectives on women's issues that have been either ignored or have justified women's secondary position in society. This research is a prerequisite and essential for achieving the goal of equitable social and economic development. Further aiming to 'insists on the value of subjectivity and personal experience.'

Since Women's studies are concerned with filling in the gaps, it becomes possible only on women by feminist research about women. These accounts written by women themselves enable their voices to be heard amongst that mass of sources that reflect the views of men. As a result, accounts of women are used as primary sources over here. Therefore, this research is the inclusive history of women.

To achieve the aforesaid objectives, a comprehensive examination of both primary and secondary sources has been carried out. These have been sampled, analyzed and reviewed. Further field survey research and interview methodology are also adopted for the current research.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DISCOURSE ON WOMEN IN WESTERN INDIA

A large body of literature has been reviewed, the focus of which was on various aspects of based on Women's history. These researches have paid attention to not only on the basic women's history,⁴ but also a myriad of topics related to writing women's history evolved in the south asian region and more specifically in western India. Studies have looked critically or have given a

⁴ Lerner, G. (1986). *The creation of patriarchy* (Vol. 1). Women and History; V. 1.; Lerner, G. (2005). *The majority finds its past: Placing women in history*. UNC Press Books.; Lerner, G. (1975). Placing women in history: Definitions and challenges. *Feminist Studies*, 3(1/2), 5-14.; Basu, A. (1991). Women's history in India: An historiographical survey. *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives*, 181-209. Blom.; I. (1991). *Writing women's history: International perspectives*. Springer.

detailed description of women as a category,⁵ royal/elite women,⁶ women's lives,⁷ women's issues,⁸ women and education,⁹ women and law,¹⁰ women and literature,¹¹ women's movement¹² and soon.¹³

However, despite the multitude of studies found, they are certain lacunas that are visible. For instance, most of these studies focus on contributory history. Unfortunately, none of these studies concentrate specifically on the regional dimension. Secondly, most of these studies and literature have carried out a thorough discussion and have highlighted specific women or aspects related to them. Some studies, although discuss the socio-economic, cultural, or educational aspect of women's history, are carried out mostly by contemporary educationists.

There is very little focus on establishing thematic historiography; Another drawback to these

⁵ Bacchi, C. L. (1996). *The politics of affirmative action: 'Women', equality and category politics*. Sage; Gunnarsson, L. (2011). A defence of the category 'women'. *Feminist theory*, 12(1), 23-37.; Frye, M. (1996). The necessity of differences: Constructing a positive category of women. *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, 21(4), 991-1010.

⁶ Moore, L. (2005). *Maharanis: The Lives and Times of Three Generations of Indian Princesses*. Penguin UK.; Ramusack, B. N. (1987). *A Princess Remembers: The Memoirs of the Maharani of Jaipur*.

⁷ Athavale, P. (1930). *My story: The autobiography of a Hindu widow*. Putnam.; Ranade, R. (1938). *Himself: The Autobiography of a Hindu Lady*. Longmans, Green and Company.; Sengupta, P. (1970). *Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: Her Life and Work*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.; Carpenter, M. (1868). *Six months in India* (Vol. 1). London, Longmans, Green.

⁸ Kosambi, M. (1988). Women, emancipation and equality: Pandita Ramabai's contribution to women's cause. *Economic and political Weekly*, WS38-WS49.; Nair, J. (1990). Uncovering the Zenana: Visions of Indian womanhood in Englishwomen's writings, 1813-1940. *Journal of Women's History*, 2(1), 8-34.; Vishwanath, L. S. (2000). *Female infanticide and social structure: A socio-historical study in Western and Northern India*. Hindustan Publishing Corporation.

⁹ Chanana, K. (Ed.). (1988). *Socialisation, Education, and Women: Explorations in Gender Identity*. Stosius Incorporated/Advent Books Division.; Nivedita, S., & Atmaprana, P. (2016). *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita-Volume 1* (Vol. 1). Advaita Ashrama (A Publication House of Ramakrishna Math, Belur Math).; Nivedita, S., & Atmaprana, P. (2019). *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita-Volume 2* (Vol. 2). Advaita Ashrama (A Publication House of Ramakrishna Math, Belur Math).

¹⁰ Janaki, N. (1996). *Women and Law in Colonial India: A Social History*. New Delhi: Kali for Women and The National Law School of India.; Carroll, L. (1983). Law, custom, and statutory social reform: the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856.; Ray, B. (Ed.). (2005). *Women of India: Colonial and post-colonial periods*. Sage.

¹¹ Mahuvakar, H. The Rise of Gujarati Novel in the 19th Century.; Patel, J. J. Voices of Indian Women as Playwrights in Wider Perspective. *Bharatiya Manyaprad*, 112.; Basiya, R. V. Selected novels of Namita Gokhale and Dhiruben Patel a comparative study.; De, S. (2015). *Selective Memory: Stories from My Life*. Penguin UK.; Mehta-Lissak, S. (2004). Bonding. Through an adoptive mother's eyes. *Midwifery today with international midwife*, (70), 30-31.; Dadawala, D. (2016). Women's Writing in Gujarati: Some Observations. *ZENITH International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 6(1), 179-184.

¹² UshaBhatt, 'Women in the Freedom Movement in Ahmedabad', Ph.D. thesis, Gujarat University, 1973; Aparna Basu, 'Gujrati women's response to Gandhi', *Samya Shakti*, 1, no. 2 (1984).; Kumar, R. (2014). *The history of doing: An illustrated account of movements for women's rights and feminism in India, 1800-1990*. Zubaan.

¹³ Desai, N. (1977). *Woman in modern India*. Vora. Shukla, Sonal. "Cultivating Minds: 19th Century Gujarati Women's Journals." *Economic and Political Weekly* (1991): WS63-WS66.

studies is that there is a lack of discussion on the history of ‘ordinary’ women in the area coming especially from western India; the most important gap that this thesis aims to bridge is that most of the studies carried out so far have concentrated adding women into history rather writing women’s history. However, in this process majorly the experience of women is not ignored or not considered important. Hence, the main scope of the current research lies in addressing the aforementioned limitations and providing understanding, analysis, and evaluating data for a better understanding of women’s history and their relevance in modern times.

HYPOTHESIS

History of men and women in western India was synonymous with each other and therefore women did not have a separate historical experience.

OBJECTIVES

- Work towards a better understanding of the past and revise the way we see women and history.
- Understand the experience of women.
- Restore women to history and history to women.

OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It gives an introductory description of the current research containing the meaning and concept of the terms such as History, Women, Women’s history, and Western India. It further deals with the major objectives of the current research, hypothesis, and review of the literature.

CHAPTER 2: EXAMINING THE ABSENCE AND PRESENCE OF WOMEN AND THEIR ISSUES THROUGH THE AGENCY OF ‘REFORMER MEN’ IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

This chapter deals with the reformer men in western India during the nineteenth century. These men acted as an agent in asserting the voices of elite women by taking up women’s issues. Both English men, as well as Indian Reformer men, played a role in improving the condition of elite women by initiating a dialogue with the major issues related with women such as female infanticide, *sati pratha* and widow remarriage. An analysis is made of the wives and women in the lives of select Indian reformer men to ascertain the level of control that was exercised on them, and how women negotiated spaces and worked their way around such pressures.

CHAPTER 3: MAKING WOMEN VISIBLE BY AGENCY OF ‘WOMEN’ IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

This chapter deals with ‘women’ as an ‘agency’ who displayed a different level of understanding of the change that was taking place in nineteenth century western India. They were more than ready to embrace the change and also were aware of the mutilated transactions taking place around them. They themselves did not become a cause of the change in the nineteenth century but they did understand the need to adapt and prepare themselves and those around them. This was partly because of the influence of other communities such as Parsi women, Anglo-Indian women and Englishwomen. Women from the Nagar Brahman community were the first ones to adapt. This did not mean that women from all the sections of the experienced the change or accepted it. It only meant that a consciousness was created among few middle class and fewer elite women to change with the changing times.

CHAPTER 4: WOMEN IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

This chapter discusses the transition for a larger number of women from private spaces to public spaces in the twentieth century in western India. The transition spelt creation of new overt roles for middle-class women. While it takes into account the changing situation of women within the household, it also focuses on the role many women played in the establishment of women's organizations in western India. The chapter also focuses on the involvement of women of western India in the Gandhian mass movements or constructive program of Mahatma Gandhi.

CHAPTER 5: HISTORICIZING THE EVERYDAY LIFE AND ISSUE OF ‘ORDINARY’ WOMEN

Hence in this chapter the lives of ordinary women are brought to light by using both the archival sources as well as folk traditions. The issues related with common women i.e. the struggle they faced; their achievements; their daily lives and routine are discussed to prove that women's history has to be different from those of men, as their experiences are also equally different.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This chapter discusses the finding and conclusions of the present study.

APPENDICES

The section contains the statistical and descriptive data documented during the present study.

GLOSSARY

This section explains the meaning of major terms used in current research.

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