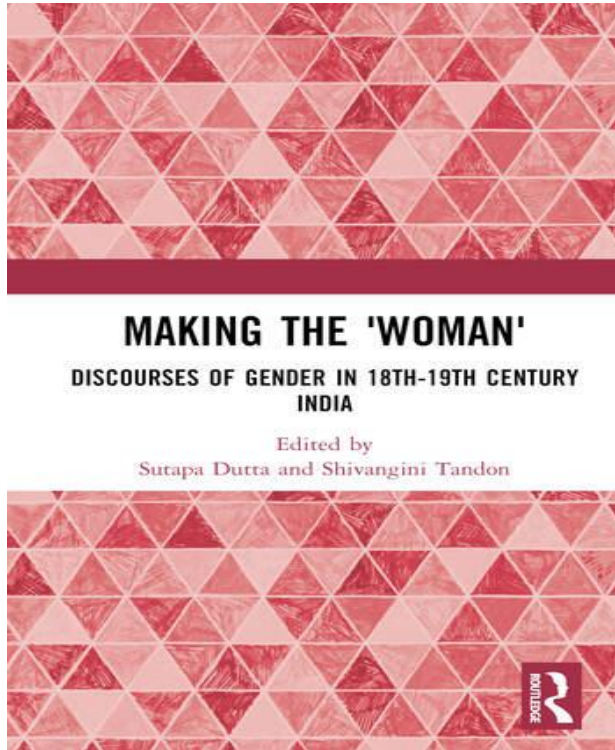


Sutapa Dutta and Shivangini Tandon (Eds.). 2024. *Making the 'Woman': Discourses of Gender in 18th-19th- Century India*. New York: Routledge, 240 pp. ISBN: 978-1-032-64053-2



This book examines notions of gender and sexuality in eighteenth-century India, giving centre stage to marginalised voices. The collection of chapters here deconstructs or challenges the dominant norms and socio-cultural formations of the period. They highlight the identities and processes of knowledge formation – hitherto treated as peripheral – by focusing on the neglected archival sources. The multiple identities covered in the book traverse through diverse regional and linguistic terrains, thereby offering a unique insight into the transitions from the pre-colonial to colonial period.

In the Introduction, the editors have sketched the discursive practices in the conceptualisation of ‘woman’ and ‘gender’ across the wide-ranging and intersecting parameters of caste, region, class, language, space, and time. They have also encapsulated the differential approach adopted by official documented histories and the revisionist historiography of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The book not only questions the obliteration of women’s agency within

the mainstream historical records but, through its examination of issues relating to women's bodies, gender and sexuality, it also uncovers the epistemic authority and agency asserted by women during that period. Here, four major themes are identified for looking at the issues of formation and representation of women's identities and gender relations amidst shifting historical contexts and spatial divisions.

In Part I, the book covers the negotiations taking place between the private and public world and problematises this very binary and its association with the feminine and masculine. Shazia Malik's work is about women performers known as *hafizās* in the Kashmir valley. She examines the extension of Victorian notions of morality, sexuality, and beauty norms to the Indian social context, which resulted in the 'othering' and marginalising particular identities, specifically the non-conforming colonial subjects. It further culminated in the shift from their much-revered status to the regulation and degeneration of these women from the pre-colonial to the colonial period. The case of *hafizās* is reminiscent of the criminalisation of *devadāsīs* (also put under the category of Nautch girls) under the colonial administration (Kay K Jordan, 2002), exhibiting the disciplinary power in form of constraints placed on 'deviant women' under Victorian mores and nationalist patriarchy.

The chapter by Tara Sami Datt examines the *Ishqnama* manuscript commissioned by the Royal Court of Awadh under Wajid Ali Shah where he regulated and centralised the *harem* as a means to assert his power and authority. This chapter also throws light on the agency exercised by women in these Awadhi *zenanas*. It is important to note here that women performers who too inhabited this space, used their performances as instruments to resist enslavement and gain power. The chapter challenges the colonial construction of *zenana* as an exotic and erotic space. Through the paintings of the manuscript, it contends that women of the *harem* made major contributions in opposing colonialism through their agency and through "the roles performed by women in the political, personal and religious as representatives of the court and the state" (53).

Part II entitled as 'Questioning the Normative', deals with the alternate voices penetrating and challenging the constitution of 'norm' in specific locations. Riya Gupta's intriguing study focuses on the construction of the ideal norms of manliness through the advice manuals known as *Mirzanamas*. The study reflects the gendered experiences of middle-class men in Mughal society, a sort of gentlemanliness that the "humbler imperial servants needed to adopt in their mannerisms" (62). It also argues that the earlier oscillating and shifting norms relating to masculinity and femininity transformed into a reaffirmation of the

gender binary through the category of a *mirza*, highlighting the gendered dimension of the *mansabdari* system.

Charu Gupta's work on Virangana women interestingly uncovers the contribution of Dalit women in the first war of independence in 1857. The popular texts of Dalit women challenge the mainstream documentation of the history of the nineteenth century, where their voices are silenced. Producing counter-history and alternative gendered archives, these non-canonical Dalit writings have based themselves on folk songs and oral narratives. These writings have provided visibility to the bravery, strength, and contributions of Jhalkari Bai, Uda Devi, Mahabiri Devi, Avanti Bai, and others in their resistance to colonialism, and challenged the dominant representation of Dalit women as vamps or victims. It turned into an important instrument in providing voice and space to Dalit women, which have "the potential to transform their dominant representations" (85).

Taking the case of tribal Girahya and their non-Girahya caste counterparts in Sirohi, southern Rajasthan (known as Girasia tribals), Maya Unnithan Kumar, in her chapter, questions the intersections of caste, gender, and tribe. Kumar has studied the gender relations and power dynamics among these tribal and non-tribal communities. A number of practices relating to marriage (such as bride price, polygamy/polygyny, and choice in marriage), the transmission of property, cultural practices such as *laaj kadna* (veiling the face), access to economic resources, and negotiations within the market spaces, are examined from an insiders' and outsiders' perspective. The last chapter in Part II deals with Nilanjana Mukherjee's analysis of the reclamation of a subversive figure of the Hindu goddess Kali to the nationalist iconography. She also argued that the appropriation of the image of the Mother Goddess in various literary writings depicts the exploitation during the colonial regime. She has critically examined the sudden mutation that the image of Kali has undergone in nineteenth-century Bengali literature.

In the chapter titled "Looking beyond a Glorified Past: Re-examining the Category of *Tawa'if* in 18th and 19th century Awadh," Tanya Burman explores the challenges posed to the construction of spatial divisions where *mehfils* and *mujras* were performed in open spaces of bazaars in eighteenth-century Awadh. Being one of the main actors in the process of construction of urban culture, the interactions of *Tawa'ifs* with men, specifically in the public sphere, defied the dominant gender norms in the social context. Despite having a major influence on the poetic culture of the time, there seems to be a stigma associated with their art and thereby less visibility was accorded to their literary contributions. Noble Srivastava outlines the layers and heterogeneity within the

category of *Tawa'if* in eighteenth-century Delhi, their active participation in the culture and politics of the time, and their degeneration under the colonial administration.

Lubna Irfan investigates the multiple roles performed by the category of non-men, *khwajasars* in the otherwise predominantly patriarchal Mughal society. The extent of authority exercised by them remained varied and ambiguous and ranged from building structures and monuments in their name, protectors and managers of *harem*, to important carriers of information. It is worth noting that the popular perception regarding them was full of animosity, especially among the nobles and royals, reflecting the deep-seated societal prejudice against them. Conflicting attitudes towards eunuchs were found to be present as they exercised power and authority as well as were treated with aversion. Their presence as an important limb of the Mughal administration somehow breaks the dominant patriarchal narratives of masculinity, thereby creating a fluid space for shifting identities and dodging the construction of spaces and identities based on binaries. Despite holding power and authority, their positioning and construction as 'other' is evident through a number of sources.

The last segment of the book 'Narratives of Femininity' covers the literary genres and representation of identities within it. Whether it is Vijaya Ramaswamy's study of Tamil Mahabharatas, Meenakshi Malhotra's extensive analysis of *Aagomoni* songs in Bengal, or Nizara Hazarika's exploration of women's writing in nineteenth-century Assam, the commonality in these attempts exists in the visibility accorded by literary genres to women across the socio-political and cultural spectrum. The detailed reading of the characters of Tamil versions of many fragmented Mahabharata aiming at women readers, provides the readers with the tale of resistance as well as of subordination. These folk tales and ballads brought into focus the non-conformist women characters, such as warrior queen Alli Arasani, Karna's wife Ponnaruvi, and others, who could not find space in the mainstream version.

Through *Aagomoni* songs, the girl child finds her presence in non-canonical literature in nineteenth-century Bengal. By tracing the informal archival sources, memoirs, diaries, letters, autobiographies, oral narratives, and folk songs and literature, women's voices were unfolded and their agencies and subjectivities, located. Retrieving oral literature helps in documenting the lives of marginalised people, tribals, and women. *Aagomani* might be seen as an "epistemological pathway to think about the affective, expressive feelings and emotions that were silenced" (185). The absence of girl child's voice in Bengali literature reflects the elusivity and relationality of the presence, thereby stressing upon the need to engage with the politics of absence and presence.

Making the Woman, therefore, provides a fresh look at issues related to gender history, South Asian history, and women's studies. The book also unravels and contests the layered and complex realities of hegemonic norms, identities, and discourses. The present work unearths the voices coming from subaltern locations across the web of social exclusions and injustices. It will definitely prove useful to students of history, women and gender studies, sociology and to anyone in general trying to give a voice to the marginalized and to the obliterated.

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