Südasien-Informationen Nr. 12
Januar 2007

EMPIRE AND THE INVENTION OF A NEW FEMININITY

India and Europe in the Second Half of the 19th Century

von Melitta Waligora

suedasien.info

Südasien-Informationen Nr. 12
Januar 2007

Empire and the Invention of a New Femininity

India and Europe in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

von Melitta Waligora

Herausgeber:

suedasien.info
Südasien-Informationsnetz e.V.
Reichenberger Straße 35
D - 10999 Berlin
Tel.: 030 – 788 95 411
Fax: 030 – 788 95 253
Email: kontakt@suedasien.net
Internet: www.suedasien.info

Spendenkonto:
Konto 7170695008
Berliner Volksbank
BLZ: 100 900 00

ISSN 1860 - 0212

Inhalt

I. Modernity and the new domestic women 4

II. Domesticity and the *bhadramahila* 7

Bratas - women's culture 8

Reminiscences of woman's life in Bengal 9

References 12

Empire and the invention of a new femininity.
India and Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century *

I want to start with a painting by Joshua Reynolds which demonstrates in a perfect way the general subject of the conference: class, race and gender. The title of the painting is "George Clive with his family and an Indian maidservant" and it was painted in the years between 1764 and 1766.

George Clive, son of a pastor and raised in humble circumstance, made a fortune in India and consequently could advance his class position in England. At the age of 43, he married a young woman, her name not given, and together they had a daughter. The issue of race is demonstrated by the figure of an Indian maidservant. But by showing the painting I primarily want to introduce the issue of gender which I would like to address in this paper. The position of man and woman can clearly be recognised: the man is standing in the outer sphere, in the public, looking perhaps into a remote future and dressed in an official suit;

* This article is based on a paper for the international conference "Empire and Boundaries. Rethinking race, class and gender an African and Asian colonial settings", Berlin 18-20 September 2006

the women belong to the inner sphere, the private home and there is a line which divides both spheres symbolised by the chair.

In particular, I will compare some fundamental points like the idea of domesticity and the relation between the public and the private sphere so much debated in nineteenth century colonial Bengal with similar developments in modern European societies.

I would like to emphasize the power of the Empire and of the colonizers to change the spirit of the whole system in those countries it colonized and to form this spirit in a new and modern way. "Spirit" (Geist), according to Max Weber means a special maxim of behaviour and distinct values shaping a special kind of lifestyle (Lebensführung). Elsewhere I have shown how the British changed the spirit of the revenue system, as well as some so called Hindu traditions like widow burning in Bengal (Waligora 1998, 2002). In this article, I will suggest how a new spirit of domesticity shaped both the minds and lifestyles of the emerging middle class, called *bhadralok*, and in particular the female *bhadramahila*. In the first part, I will make some remarks about the concepts of femininity and domesticity and in the second, I will show how these concepts have influenced women's culture and images.

I. Modernity and the new domestic women

For some time the notions of modernity and domesticity in Bengal have been discussed among scholars and since the publication of Partha Chatterjee's well known text "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" (1989), there seems to be a consensus that efforts to reform the *bhadramahila* were connected to the transformation of the nation and, in this context, was largely anti-colonial. This so-called women's question was embedded in a national ideology which constructed certain pairs of opposites: that between the material and the spiritual, the inner and the outer, the home and the world. For both sexes special tasks were designated: the man had to fight in the outer world to liberate the motherland and to bring progress to the nation; the woman had to protect the essence of the nation in the inner home by her female virtues. The invention of a new femininity as well as of a new patriarchy seemed to be a subordinated part of the nationalist project. The new interpretation of ancient female mythological figures like Sita, Savitri and Sati as national icons served to emphasize the special place of the new woman: at home where the husband is her god (s. Partha Chatterjee 1989).

But the construction of femininity in a national framework is not special for Bengal, but rather a general manner in which national importance was assigned to the new domestic women. Even in Britain, Germany or Poland - to mention only some examples - the actions of modern women, in principle confined to the private domain, have nonetheless, with slight differences, equally meaningful effects on the nation or state and are therefore indispensable. For instance, Malgorzata Fidelis wrote about Polish women at the end of the nineteenth century: "…in Poland, the public realm, controlled by a hostile state, was perceived as alien, while the private sphere was a source of freedom and independence in

need of defence against state-imposed laws. … women presided over the spiritual Poland at home" (Fidelis 2001:111). If you replace the word 'hostile state' with colonial state, this statement appears similar to the situation in Bengal.

Who is this new domestic woman appearing during the nineteenth century everywhere in the Empire and elsewhere? The idea of a special domain of domesticity emerged at the end of the eighteenth century in England and had its high noon in the years between 1830 and 1860 (Tosh 1999:6/7). Until the eighteenth century, "the economic base of most households in Britain was some form of family economy … and women were contributors to the family income in the way considered appropriate to their class or family situation" (Jordan 1999:24/25). Domestic relations were relations of production, but now, in the nineteenth century, in principle, men worked outside the home for wages and conducted political activities in the new public sphere, while women devoted their lives to family and household. At this time, the economic man and domestic woman were born alongside the supposed separation of the private and public. A new social class - the middle class or *Bürgertum* - invented not only modern industrial capitalism, but also developed a new lifestyle and cultural habits shaped mainly by education, work and family life (Jordan 1999:33; Frevert 2003:80).

By the mid-nineteenth century, the domestic realm, far from being abstracted from the rational market, became an indispensable arena for the creation, nurturance and embodiment of these values (of liberal rationality). The cult of industrial rationality and the cult of domesticity formed a crucial but concealed alliance (McClintock 1995:168).

At first these developments took place in Britain, but soon we can observe similar developments in Bengal too. In Bengal, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a middle class emerged called *bhadralok*. This class is defined - like the British gentlemen - by modern education and modern work environments. Usually, only the first point - education - is studied as causal for the formation of the *bhadralok* and the second point is ignored because of an underdeveloped modern industry in Bengal. But I think both points are crucial, especially for the understanding of the rise of domesticity. The demands of the new working sphere such as being hard-working, on time, well organized, efficient and clean, were parts of a new lifestyle, "one which was almost as new in Europe and England as it was in India" (Walsh 1995:333). Already in the 1820s in Calcutta, a flourishing civil society existed, visible in schools, offices, workshops, press and so on. The lives of most *bhadralok* were shaped by paid work demanding long and fixed hours far from home, by - according to brahmanical values - ritual impurity of language, food and clothing as well as neglect of daily, sacred observances (Chakrabarty 1994:72). Much like his counterparts in England and elsewhere, the Bengali male had to cope with a world of new working conditions and for this he was also in need of a modern home and a new woman. As Judith Walsh rightly emphasized, "the impulse for this is not primarily ideological but comes from the real conditions of life" (Walsh 1995:357).

This impulse can also be seen in a special genre of literature developing in the second half of the nineteenth century in Bengal and only some time earlier in England: that of advice books about domestic issues and proper conduct of women. It would be too simple to see in this only a way to imitate the Western lifestyle or education. But these advice books and the efforts of the *bhadralok* to reform their women "illustrate the degree to which men wished to change the lives and conditions of women because the conditions of their own lives had changed" (Walsh 1995:356). The middle-class Bengali man wanted his wife to be equipped for, to cope with and to help him with his new life in the public. By the way, this changing of the role of women in the family meant new roles for men too. The husband-wife relation was now considered to be the most important one which means for instance a lessened dominance of the mother-in-law for the wife and for the husband a limited relation with his male peers (Tosh 1999:6).

I would like to emphasize firstly, and in contrast to Partha Chatterjee's and Dipesh Chakrabarty's argument of two distinct domains of power and knowledge - the notions of domesticity and femininity rising in nineteenth century Britain that shaped both the public and the private lifestyle of the Bengali middle class in a very similar way; secondly, the fact that even in Bengal the invention of the new femininity had its roots primarily in the public working sphere which in modern times seems to inform private life much more than in former times (Gupta 2003:59, 62).

Domesticity as well as femininity can be characterised by two aspects, hardware and software. The meaning of domesticity in the sense of hardware - as shown by Anne McClintock - was "to fashion the identity of a large class of people with clear affiliations, distinct boundaries and separate values - organized around the presiding domestic values of monogamy, thrift, order, accumulation, classification, quantification and regulation - the values of liberal rationality" (McClintock 1995:167/168). To say it with Foucault, domesticity - or: home sweet home - is one of the many locations, beside factory, jail, school and hospital, where the modern human being could learn to adapt body and mind to the new conditions of work and modern lifestyle - by discipline and punishment. The family, the home and the woman in that home, are now in some crucial aspects part of the public because it is the public which defined the norms of behaviour in that home. In a certain sense, it is not the private decision of a couple or a woman how to organise the household but the public in form of many advice books giving the rules for the domestic space.

These rules are the same as in the public space: strict routines and timetables for the whole domestic day which was measured into mechanical units like industrial work; each activity had its special time: cleaning, eating, using the toilet and making love.

One of the purposes of this new home was to prepare the children for a life in the modern world. This can be seen as the hardware of modern life, shaping both the public and private by the same values.

The software looks different and seems to be lovely. It is an ideology which in certain ways helps to disguise the hard facts of modern life and to adapt the woman to her new domestic tasks. In England she is now the "Angel of the home" and in Bengal the *grihalakshmi* - the goddess Lakshmi of the house. Both female ideals are backed by traditional religious values and texts, Christian and Brahmanical respectively. Since time immemorial and designed by God, women stay at home, wait for their husbands, and serve them. The home should be a refuge for the hard working man. He expects at home rest and refreshment as well as emotional and psychological support. To fulfil these tasks, the housewife works hard, but invisible and unpaid. Ideally, by nature women fit very well for this role: they are selfless, modest, timid, and so on. Their higher morality and spirituality should be protected and therefore, it is better for them and the whole community to confine them to the home. Because, at the same time their morality and spirituality represent the essence of the nation and therefore women have a public, national task: to preside over the spiritual India at home, as mentioned above by Malgorzata Fidelis with reference to Polish women.

We see that both, the hardware and the software aspects of the seemingly private sphere of domesticity, as well as femininity are informed by the public life, interests and values disguised as they may be. Both are essential aspects of modernity and their notions - or spirit - developed in the heart of the Empire and circulated deep into its farthest areas. Both remain prevailing concepts as well, although for instance around the 1860s, English men were willing to bring an end to the "tyranny of the five-o'clock tea" (Tosh 1999:7). Furthermore, there are many serious inner conflicts between differing notions: on the one hand the idea of a marriage based on friendship and closeness between husband and wife and on the other side the belief in fundamental sexual differences; or the principles of competition within the bourgeois society versus the ideal of harmonic bourgeois family life.

II. Domesticity and the *bhadramahila*

In a lecture given in Germany some years ago, Madhu Kishwar, one of the leading Indian feminists and editor of the well-known women's journal "Manushi" wondered at the stereotypes about Indian women in German minds and the reluctant attitude to hear anything other than about dowry murder, widow burning and killing of female unborn babies. Madhu Kishwar does not deny that these evils exist but she is unwilling to accept this as a description of the situation of Indian women at all. Actually, this present-day attitude is not so much different from the nineteenth century colonial image of Indian women. Since the publication of James Mill's "History of India" in 1818, it seems to be without question that the Hindu women were held in extreme degradation. The inability of the Indian men to care properly for their women was a sign of their inability to rule themselves. Hence, the British men have a civilising mission in India and the British women have to be happy living in a civilised domesticity without *purdah* (seclusion of women), widow burning, child-marriage and so on. Even in the nineteenth century, many

of the reform movements aimed at women were concerned only with high-class or -caste problems such as the prohibition of remarriage for widows. But this prohibition applied only to the high-caste widows, approximately ten per cent of population, whereas the majority could remarry. However, the lamentable fate of these poor widows seems to be a fixed image, especially the Western image of Hindu women. Recently, in a documentary film about Indian women, produced by an Austrian woman, you can hear that all widows have to cut their hair. But, what you could see is that almost all widows were in possession of their hair even if they had covered it with their sari. The power of the once colonial state to define the images about the other is long lasting.

Now I'm not so much concerned with these long-lasting effects of colonial images on German or other minds. What interests me more is how fast the figure of the abject Hindu woman, as well as the new concepts of domesticity and femininity modelled on the Victorian example, have had a determining influence on the Hindu women themselves, especially on the bhadramahila. For this, I will give two examples.

Bratas - women's culture

The first is about a special Bengali women's culture called *brata*. The word means vow, fast or ritual and in this way *bratas* are known everywhere in India. In particular, bratas are traditional domestic rituals, mainly of women. If you would like to know something more about bratas and consult some texts of scholars or autobiographies of Indian women you can find always the same description: bratas are religious rituals performed by women to get a good husband and to keep their husband, children and extended family healthy. By performing these rituals, usually in the private home, the woman proved to be a true *pativrata* (devoted wife), fulfilling the only suitable role for a woman: to be a wife and mother, mainly of sons. Therefore this *brata* tradition referred to here seems to be nothing but a sign of the confined situation in which Bengali women have to live since time immemorial and of an age-old patriarchy. To give one example, in her book "Memoirs of an Indian woman", Shudha Mazumdar (born 1899) tells us something about her childhood experiences with the *brata* tradition. She observed her mother performing the important Savitri *brata* to avoid widowhood. Designated for the unmarried little girl was the most popular Shiva *brata* to get a good husband like Shiva. So, a little girl may speak as follows:

> Cows in the cowshed, and corn in the storehouse,
> Vermilion between the parting of my hair, every year a son,
> And may not a single one die and
> Never may a teardrop fall from my eye. (Mazumdar 1977:18)

However, this *brata* culture seems to reflect more the situation of middle class Bengali women at the end of the nineteenth century up to now with its notion of domesticity, where women have lost their honoured place in the family economy. We know that there exists many more *bratas* which give evidence of the different roles of women. Bengali women, like women elsewhere in pre-industrial societies, were an important and indispensable part of the household economy. Of the 23 *bratas* Eva-Maria Gupta (Gupta

1983) has described, only a small number is entirely concerned with the female tasks of mother and wife, whereas most *bratas* refer to the economy and well-being of the whole community for which the women take over special responsibilities. These *bratas* were performed by all women together - therefore it was a social and in a certain sense a public activity of these women. They reveal a number of duties for women: to provide for their family and community, to protect their family and community, to care for the rising generation and, taking all of these tasks together, to exercise control over their family and community. It is neither my aim here to give an idealised picture of female life in the past nor to overestimate this ritual tradition of *bratas*. But I see in this now impoverished brata culture the influence of the modern concept of domesticity in the lives of middle class women. The newly educated *bhadramahila* looked down on the *brata* tradition as superstitious and old-fashioned. Generally, the modern Bengali woman has lost a once rich culture and knows *bratas* mainly for family matters. Though these sorts of losses are to be expected, I feel cause to raise concern. To forget one's own history means to take the present as the only possibility. The nineteenth century faced the duality of both the colonial image of Hindu women needing to be civilised, and the new patriarchy confining women to the home, subordinated under the national question. Most of the *bhadramahila* accepted not only the colonial image but also perceived the new patriarchy as a progress. For them, the past had nothing to offer for their upcoming emancipation.

Reminiscences of woman's life in Bengal

This brings me to my second example which I will outline briefly. In the early writings of Bengali women, we can read a lot about the previously mentioned abject Hindu women and the progress which these women expected from modern age. Generally, these texts reflect the situations and hopes of the *bhadramahila*. They criticised the well known high-class evils, depicted their new life as domestic women, and put into words their thirst for education. In a way, they used the concepts of the new patriarchy that would allow them to gain greater freedom from an old patriarchy that had an equally powerful hold on their lives (Walsh 1997:647).

In a recently published collection of texts representing the voices of the *bhadramahila*, I found some interesting thoughts where women reflected their situations from a more historical perspective. In one text, published in 1897, Krishnabhabini Das (1864-1919) questions whether education would bring emancipation for the Bengali women. She compares the lives of her grandmother's generation with the lives of her daughter's generation and concluded "…our daughters have learnt even English, despite this their minds are even narrower and the working space in their lives has shrunk further" (Das 2003:78). Then, she remembers what she had seen with her own eyes, "that our mothers and grandmothers used to be completely independent in such matters as visiting relatives, taking care of those who fell ill, making arrangements for guests, rendering benevolent services to others and inviting people to their homes. But now the lives of our women have

become so limited and dependent on others …" (Das 2003:79) She criticises that the bookish knowledge which the bhadramahila received has not brought them independence and courage. Far from it! She tells us: "Our grandmothers would often kill snakes in their storerooms, but now we get scared at the sight of cockroaches, not to speak of killing scorpions!" (Das 2003:80). In order to emphasize her opinion that "the Bengali women have not made any real progress" (Das 2003:79), but trapped in a new patriarchy, she compares their conditions with those of other women, not from Europe but from other parts of India. Parsi women as well as the women of the Himalayan provinces "do not have an iota of formal education, but having enjoyed the same kind of independence as their male counterparts" (Das 2003:79). They are courageous, lively and active. Although Krishnabhabini Das does not seem to be very outspoken, for her the crucial points for female emancipation were women's independence and courage, both depending on the roles women could play in the working sphere. But the male *bhadralok*, just as the English gentlemen, rejected the idea that formal education for women might also lead to a modern professional career.

In a text published in 1899, "Words from times past", Swarnakumari Devi (1855-1932) remembers also the lives of women in former times and the changes which took place in her lifetime. She was a daughter of the famous Tagore family, giving her a privileged background. She mentions the tradition of keeping women confined to the inner house and if, for example, her mother had the permission to ritually bathe in the Ganges, the palanquin bearers would dip the palanquin wholly into the water and bring her back unrevealed. But she remembers also that "no woman in these families was illiterate" and that all took pride in women's education (Devi 2003:135). Learning was brought into the *antahpur* (women's quarters) through a Vaishnavi lady of whom Swarnakumari says, "her intellect and learning were extraordinary" and that she was quite well-versed in Sanskrit and storytelling. Perhaps this was not considered proper for a woman to be educated in this way, because a Sanskrit teacher was appointed for the daughters of the Tagore family. In addition, a European lady began to come to the *antahpur*. This is amazing: even Debendranath Tagore, who was very afraid of the Christian missionary influence on the Bengali youth and a strong supporter of education in Bengali

Abb. 1: Swarnakumari Devi (from: Kumar, Radha. *The History of Doing*. New Delhi: Kali for Women 1993:38)

language and Hindu knowledge, replaced the female Hindu Vaishnavi teacher in his household by a European and most likely a Christian lady to teach his daughters. But, as Parna Sengupta has shown, the male *bhadralok* society in general was very much opposed to the idea of continuing to use the traditional Vaishnavi women's teacher for the education of the *bhadramahila* for two reasons: 1. the upper-caste Hindu society equated the heterodox religious practices of lower-caste Vaishnavi women with deviant sexual practices which were opposed to upper-caste norms as well as Victorian morality; 2. modern education was defined as much through the discipline of work as through learning of appropriately feminine comportments and skills like needlework, which does not belong to the teaching programme of Vaishnavis. Furthermore, the *bhadralok* cut off the efforts of the colonial state to qualify the Vaishnavi women as modern teachers (Sengupta 2005:34). These women challenged the comfortable new ordering of gender and sexuality and therefore could have no place in this new order.

So, the domestic lifestyle of the *bhadramahila*, shaped according to the Victorian model, became the ideal for all Bengali women even if the women of the lower classes - that means: the majority of women - could not afford to stay at home, needle working or reading books. But in this way, the Bengali middle class - dependent as it was on colonial rule - ensured for itself to a certain extent dominance at home (that means: in Bengal): to define the place of the lower classes in a new way.

References

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. The difference-deferral of a colonial modernity: Public debates on domesticity in British Bengal. In: Arnold, David/David Hardiman (eds.): *Subaltern studies VIII: Essays in honour of Ranajit Guha*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Chatterjee, Partha. The nationalist resolution of the women's question. In: Kumkum Sangari/Sudesh Vaid (eds.): *Recasting women. Essays in colonial history*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989.

Das, Krishnabhabini. Independence and subjugation in women's lives. In: Malini Bhattacharya/Abhijit Sen (eds.): *Talking of power. Early writings of Bengali women*. Kolkata: STREE, 2003

Devi, Swarnakumari. Words from times past. In: Malini Bhattacharya/Abhijit Sen (eds.): *Talking of power. Early writings of Bengali women*. Kolkata: STREE, 2003

Fidelis, Malgorzata. Participation in the creative work of the nation: Polish women intellectuals in the cultural construction of female gender roles, 1864-1890. In: *Journal of Women's History*, Vol.13 No.1 (Spring 2001)

Frevert, Ute. The middle classes as public and private: Culture, gender and modernization in 19th century Europe. In: Gurpreet Mahajan (ed.): *The public and the private. Issues of democratic citizenship*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003

Gupta, Dipankar. The domesticated public: Tradition, modernity and the public/private divide. In: Gurpreet Mahajan (ed.): *The public and the private. Issues of democratic citizenship*. New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2003

Gupta, Eva-Maria. *Bratas und Alpanas in Bengalen*. Wiesbaden: Steiner 1983

Jordan, Ellen. *The women's movement and women's employment in nineteenth century Britain*. London: Routledge, 1999

Mazumdar, Shudha. *Memoirs of an Indian woman*. Edited by Geraldine Forbes. New York: East Gate Book, 1977

McClintock, Anne. *Imperial leather. Race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest*. London: Routledge, 1995

Sengupta, Parna. Teaching gender in the colony. The education of 'outsider' teachers in late-nineteenth-century Bengal. In: *Journal of women's history*. 2005, Vol.17, No.4

Tosh, John. *A man's place. Masculinity and the middle-class home in Victorian England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999

Waligora, Melitta. Sie änderten den „Geist" des ganzen Systems: Zum Beginn der britischen Herrschaft in Bengalen. In: *Beiträge des Südasien-Instituts,* Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, 1998, Heft 10

Waligora, Melitta. Sie änderten den „Geist“ des ganzen Systems (II): Witwenverbrennung in Bengalen. In: *Beiträge des Südasien-Instituts,* Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, 2002, Heft 11

Waligora, Melitta. Brata-Rituale bengalischer Frauen. In: Franz Schneider (ed.): *Trauben aus Elfenbein. Festschrift für Alokeranjan Dasgupta*. Heidelberg: Draupadi Verlag, 2004

Walsh, Judith. The virtuous wife and the well-ordered home: The re-conceptualization of Bengali women and their worlds. In: Rajat Kanta Ray (ed.): *Mind, body and Society: Life and mentality in colonial Bengal*. Calcutta 1995

Walsh, Judith. What women learned when men gave them advice: Rewriting patriarchy in late-nineteenth-century Bengal. In: *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 56, no.3 (August 1997)

Die Autorin

Dr. Melitta Waligora hat an der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin Philosophie und anschließend die moderne Philosophie Indiens studiert. Seit 1982 ist sie wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin und Dozentin am Institut für Asien- und Afrikawissenschaften der HU. Ihr Forschungs- und Lehrschwerpunkte sind Indiens Moderne, Philosophie, Religion, Frauengeschichte und Sozialstrukturen.