

Education and Female Identity

Pliable Pupils and Sufficient Self-Directors: Narratives of Female Education by Five British Women Writers 1778-1814

by Barnita Bagchi;
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SACHIDANANDA MOHANTY

An emperor of Japan, born under the supposed constellation of a dog conceived such affection for the canine species that he ordered, that whenever a dog died, the owner of him should carry the carcass to a certain burial-ground appointed for that purpose. As a gentleman was one day sweating under the load of a dead dog, and complaining of the hardship of the order; his friend, to comfort him, said, "we have reason to thank god, that the emperor was not born under a horse, for a horse would have been a much heavier burthen." In this manner, a mind may be soothed in actual misfortunes. If your husband makes you tremble, be thankful that he does not make you quake.

– Lady Mary Hamilton¹

Barnita Bagchi's critical exploration of the interface between female education and the fictional form in Britain (1778-1814) easily commends itself as a trendsetter for several reasons. Written with feeling, fervour and objectivity,

the volume breaks through several politically correct barriers – literary, pedagogic, canonical and cultural – and comes out as a pioneering work in its category.

The best part of Bagchi's approach is to break out of artificially constructed binaries. Thus, while proponents of the literary canon in the western academia keep fighting a rear guard battle and appear defensive about the White Anglo Saxon and Protestant (WASP) tradition, Bagchi has no such anxiety. Similarly, she shows that the social and political conservatism of writers, including women-authors, need not necessarily be a drawback when judging the merit of their literary-cultural contributions. The five women writers that she takes up for close study did not evince a pronounced affinity towards radical or revolutionary causes such as the French Revolution or the American War of Independence. Nevertheless, argues Bagchi, their fiction showed a deep engagement with the woman question and punctured male pretensions regarding what constitutes 'correct' female behaviour. Thirdly, while most educationists and littérateurs continue to operate, despite the call for interdisciplinary research, in separate spheres, Bagchi brilliantly brings them together so that both benefit in a manner that goes beyond superficial eclecticism.

Barnita Bagchi focuses on five British women writers who wrote between 1778 and 1814. Lady Mary Hamilton, Clare Reeve, Elizabeth Hamilton, Mary Brunton and the early Jane Austen wrote extensively on the theme of female education, a "subject of anxiety for print culture and fiction". Many of these writers wrote didactic fiction and all "grappled with epistemological and ethical status of fiction which they connected with female experience". Their works suggest possibilities – narrative and emancipatory – as well as closures.

To grasp the central significance of this body of fiction from the female angle, we can do no better than to look at a quote Bagchi offers from Erasmus Darwin's *A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools*.²

The female character should possess the mind of retrieving virtues rather than the bold and dazzling ones, great eminence in almost anything is sometimes injurious to a young lady, whose temper and disposition should appear to be plaint rather than robust, to be ready take impression rather than to be decidedly masked, as great strengths of character, however excellent, is liable to alarm both her own and the other sex.

In challenging Darwin, the British women authors adopted various approaches and techniques. They handled multiple genres as well. For instance, Hannah More wrote a thinly novelised conduct book entitled *Coelebs In Search of A Wife*³ (p 4). Similarly, Mary Hamilton's *Munster Village*⁴ is in line with earlier utopias, envisaged as societies run and dominated by women. In this sense, the writers were responding to the crucial importance of female education that votaries like Aphra Behn, Delariviere Manley and Eliza Haywood voiced in the 18th century Britain.

In Samuel Richardson's female centred fiction *Pamela* (1740-42) and *Clarissa* (1747-48), we see that fiction took on a powerful educative function. Invoking insightfully Habermas' work on the 18th century public sphere, Bagchi shows that the literary public sphere where women played a major role, underlines the importance of female 'counter public sphere' (p 27).

How preciously do these authors achieve their task? Bagchi's chronicle offers some interesting examples. Lady Mary Hamilton's novels were mostly written in the 1790s *Letters From the Duches de*

Cruï, *Memoirs of the Marchioners de Louvies*, *Munster Village* depict fictional discussion of female education. Lady Filmer in her correspondence with Sir James Bruce disagrees that modesty, meekness, humility and reserve are peculiar to female nature. In *Munster Village*, Hamilton offers a 'feminised fictional utopia' (p 32). Similarly, Lady Filmer argues that "women should act as timers in public sphere and men would be 'expeditors' charged with the detail and dispatch of business" (p 36). On the other hand, according to Lady Frances's programme in selecting female students, priority was to be given "to those who labour under any imperfection of body – endeavouring by increasing main resources within themselves and to compensate for their outward defects" (p 38).

Likewise, Clara Reeve's *The School for Widows* (1791)⁵ advocates independence and self-reliance in women. Her novel could justifiably be called a female-authored Bildungsroman focused on the prominent theme of education. She traces the mental development of each of her female protagonist and their need to find vocations in the midst of angst-ridden marriages, just as Elizabeth Hamilton's *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Raja* (1796),⁶ employs the oriental tale primarily for exposing the flaws of her own civilisation.

On the other hand, Mary Brunton's work, argues Bagchi, remains a site "primarily of tensions rather than neat resolutions-tensions between self-assertions and self-abnegation, between wandering and finding a home between the inner and the outer, between religious intent and secular plot, between naturalism of style and non-naturalism, between marriage and the space outside marriage" (p 139). Jane Austen too explores the limits of teachableness of female disposition in her early writings.

Finally, what sense does Bagchi make of a set of complex and richly woven narratives? She maintains that there is in this body of fiction a deep-seated tension between "pliability and autonomy or self-direction in the process of education". While women in various roles attempt to fashion their autonomy, they remain largely within a conservative framework, that seeks to maintain the hierarchies in society. Bagchi says that her subject of study was determined by the fact that such

women belonged at once to the gentry and aristocracy. Their fiction became a site of contestation for legitimacy. Thus the book seems "to make many uncomfortable claims about feminism, about the enlightenment, about Romanticism, about notions of education and developments" (p 22). We are also confronted with similar questions over accepted terms like 'pre-modern', 'emergent bourgeois' and 'feminists' (p 23).

Such paradoxes in education development and female identity formation, Bagchi suggests, continue even today. The questions are abiding and are perhaps best understood by looking at the lives and work of British gentlewomen of the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Barnita Bagchi has written a fine critical work with an impressive range of allusions and discursive practices. It is an extremely readable account of a totally unknown chapter of the canonical (British) literature. With an original approach and jargon free style, she questions existing premises and assumptions. However, the work could have gained a depth and understanding, especially for an Indian audience, by relating the lives of authors and their fictional experience with their Indian counterparts.⁷

The absence here is rather surprising given Bagchi's early training in at Jadavpur University, known for its preference for the comparative approach. Hopefully in a new edition, she would try to bring in the needed Indian perspective. Barnita Bagchi shows that hybridity as a fact of life comes prior to postcolonial thinking. It governed the life and career of British literary women in the 17th and 18th century. One could argue that it has relevance for the lives of Indian literary women as well. □□

Notes

- 1 Lady Mary Hamilton, *Letters from Duches de Cruï*, p 246.
- 2 Joseph Johnson, London, 1797.
- 3 All references are parenthetically given in Bagchi's text.
- 4 *Munster Village: A Novel*, 2 vols, Robson, Walter and Robinson, London, 1778.
- 5 *The School for Widows*, 2 vols, Wogan and nine others, Dublin, 1791.
- 6 *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, 2 vols, H Colbert, Dublin, 1797.
- 7 See the author's forthcoming book: *Lost Tradition: Early Women's Writing in Orissa*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, India.