

Gender, Subaltern Studies and the Invisibility of Women

Kate Currie

Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YL, U.K.

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ABSTRACT This article addresses the issue of gender and women's invisibility. The first section considers traditional anthropological approaches to gender. The second section illustrates how feminist historians have attempted to reveal processes of exclusion. The third section looks at the links between feminist historiography and the objective of the *Subaltern Studies* scholars, namely, the reconstruction of the past from the reconstructed perspectives of those 'hidden from history.' This is followed by a critical assessment of the collective's expressed aim, illustrated from a range of contributions, and with specific reference to gender.

Recent years have seen the proliferation of critical feminist challenges to the assumed invisibility of women, especially in relation to 'development'¹ and anthropological discourses. In *Visibility and Power* (1986), Leela Dube confronts the issue of women's invisibility from a multi-dimensional perspective highlighting how invisibility is constructed by outside external agents (development planners and anthropologists) and insiders, for whom, women's invisibility is embedded in community and traditional cultural values. Within the insider/outsider frames, women emerge primarily as wives and mothers, largely marginalized from the spheres of politics and production.²

I

Prior to the emergence of a growing awareness of gender relations in the mid to late 1970's, women were probably more visible in anthropology than other social sciences, but this visibility was circumscribed. From the outset, within anthropology, sex operated as an organizing principle which structured the analysis of kinship, family and marriage. Within the village India context, the underlying organizational mode was that of the caste system, the mechanism whereby gender was subsumed to a predominantly Hindu culture. Anthropological studies of the 1960's and 1970's illustrate the point. The synchronic focus of the myriad village India studies not only failed to create a theoretical space for the analysis of conflict,

it also impeded the analysis of gender relations. Within anthropological writings of this period, women are constructed as gendered subjects through Hindu rituals and practices, which reinforce their subordination and invisibility within a patriarchal system. Two classic examples of this practice are found in the respective analyses of (Dumont, 1970) and (Srinivas, 1962). In both instances, gender issues are absent, and the only references to women are in relation to pollution and formal ritual rules governing marriage. In the preoccupation with endogamy and hypergamy, women are defined only in relation to men and through the Brahmanical canon. Dumont is interested in Hindu religious law defined through the sacred texts. Hence: "A menstruating (or pre-pubertal) woman may not mount her husband's funeral pyre, she must wait for four days and the final bath (she would have to bathe in any case before burning herself alive)" (1970 : 88), and "A menstruating woman may not cook for her family" (91). In a discussion of secondary marriage, Dumont alerts his readers to what he sees as the liberating³ effects of primary marriage in which certain women (eg the Nayar women of Malabar) are ritually married to gods, objects, fruits or plants (1970 : 161). In his early work, M.N. Srinivas does not depart significantly from this perspective informing, without critical comment, that: "A wife who shows utter devotion of her husband is held up as an ideal" (1962 : 47). This idealized model of womanhood informs his observation that "A woman's hope is to predecease her husband and thus avoid becoming a widow" and "A wife is entitled to half the religious merit earned by her husband by fasting, praying and penance" (47).

In her introduction to *Women in Indian Society* (1996), the second volume of five in the *Social Structure and Change* series in honour of M.N. Srinivas, Karuna Chanana contends that Srinivas' later work reflects the gradual emergence of a position which acknowledges the significance

of gender as a key variable in anthropology. No reference is made by Chanana to his early work and the way in which womanhood is constituted in accordance with the then prevailing male anthropological orthodoxy. Certainly, by 1978, Srinivas had modified his ideas, and, anchoring his analysis within the division of labour, he demonstrates how women of different social strata contributed to productive work within a patriarchal rural economy. The overall framework of Srinivas' 1978 analysis, however, is what he perceives as the transition from tradition to modernity what, in his estimation, enables women to move from one structural and cognitive frame of reference to another.⁴

II

Identifying women's visibility is now a major preoccupation of academic feminists and activists. Feminist historians are in the forefront of this project, highlighting how women have been excluded as actors and authors of history, their voices muted (Chakravarti and Roy, 1988). Chakravarti (Sangari and Vaid, 1990) considers the way in which beliefs about the status of women in the past, derived from both formal historical narratives and popular myth, are transmitted, internalized and reconstituted over time. Hence, nationalist writers, reacting against the colonial view of the subjugated Indian woman, idealized the Aryan goddess: the enduring Sita, the glorious Lakshmi, the loyal Savitri. The cultural encounter between India and England structured the context in which a predominantly Hindu, nationalist male middle class reconstituted a female identity - in contrast with the prevalent colonial conceptions of Western (modernized) women - in which the idealized Aryan woman of the Vedic period emerged as the dominant model of the female past. By the late nineteenth century, the Vedic *dasi* was relegated to the mists of time, rejected as a legitimate object of historical research.

Chakravarti's analysis coincides with and complements that of Sumanta Banerjee (Sangari and Vaid, 1990). Both authors share the common aim of the *Recasting Women* collection editors for whom an immanent conception of patriarchy, in which every aspect of reality is gendered, provides the starting point for making sense of the historical processes which structured patriarchal systems in colonial India. Banerjee seeks to rediscover the lost female voice, tracing the popular culture of

Bengali women - expressed through poems, songs and drama - marginalized in nineteenth century Bengal by colonialists and the Bengali male elite. Running concurrently, but diverging from the dichotomized colonial construction of womanhood (subjugated Indian women/independent educated western women), the Bengali *bhadralok* engaged in initiating and framing female cultural emancipation within a revitalized Vedic context in which the robust authentic products of popular female culture were denied legitimacy.

One other instance of the way in which patriarchy permeates state and civil society, constituting and upholding patriarchies for different classes and in different historical conjunctures, is explored in Lata Mani's (Sangari and Vaid, 1990) analysis of the discursive aspects of the *sati* debate. Mani's approach is to decode three texts representing three separate and distinctive threads or discourses: the official colonial; the Hindu reformist or indigenous progressive (associated with the Bengal Renaissance revivalist reformers such as Rammohan Roy who challenged the orthodox interpretation of Vedic texts on *sati*); and the Hindu traditionalist or indigenous conservative. In Mani's reconstruction, the colonial emphasis on the centrality of scripture to Indian society - in itself an Orientalist shift from a variegated popular oral tradition - structured the terrain on which the *sati* debate took place. Since the domain of tradition was located within Brahmanical scriptures, the debate centred on scriptural interpretation. Within this context, the three books selected by Mani - 1) the 1818 letter of the Superintendent of Police (Walter Ewar) to the Judicial Department; 2) the Bengali Rammohan Roy's 1830 tract in favour of abolition; 3) the petition to the Governor General opposing the regulation - constituted three distinct scriptural representations. The real subject, woman, is removed from the historical stage: excluded as actor and author (Chakravarti and Roy, 1988). Women - whether acquiescent or resistant - are portrayed only through male discourse structured through the polarity of heroine or victim.

This discursive perspective (see Gayatri Spivak, 1988) focuses on analyzing different (male) *sati* discourses,⁵ while acknowledging the absent female voice. The colonial discourse

(white men saving brown women from brown men) and the traditionalists' discourse (the women actually wanted to die) deny the female (object of the discourses) a discursive location as acting agent. For Spivak, the colonial discourse on *sati* is part of a system of representations that form the reality of India. In this sense, colonialism is not merely territorially determined, but is a subject-constituting project (Spivak, 1985). Within the colonial discourse on *sati* the woman is constructed as an object of slaughter; the eternal victim, an object to be saved, by the enlightened civilized colonisers, from the bestiality of Hinduism. The female subject is denied a subject position. She cannot speak. She is represented through male discourse - and is thus the site of an ideological battleground - in which others speak for her. Intervening between colonialist and traditionalists, the Bengal Enlighteners' discourse is the colonialists' representation of the noble Hindu. For Spivak, the *sati* is caught between imperialist and indigenous patriarchy. Her voice is lost and cannot be retrieved from the silence of history. As a subject, she can now only be constituted through positions accommodated within contending patriarchal discourses.⁶

III

For the editors and contributors of (*Recasting Women*, 1990), a feminist historiography reappraises and reconstitutes historiography. It confronts and deconstructs the dominant male orthodoxies: colonialist and nationalist. Here, the stated objective coincides with that of the *Subaltern Studies* scholars in the six volumes (1982 - 1989) edited by Ranajit Guha. The initial intellectual inspiration underlying the subaltern project is Guha's critique of colonialist (Orientalist), nationalist (elitist), and Marxist (western) discourses. The critique of Marxism is directed at that Eurocentric variant which denies theoretical space to peasants, nomadic and pastoral tribes, outcastes, and those on the margin of society (Brass, 1991). For the contributors to the project, the common aim is a shared focus on the reconstruction of the past from reconstructed perspectives of those 'hidden from history'. The objective, is the production of an history from below through the identification of an emergent subaltern consciousness absent in both colonialist and nationalist historical narratives. In the Preface to

volume I, Guha sets the agenda for the series specifying the promotion of a systematic and informed discussion, of subaltern themes in the field of South Asian studies (1982 : vii) in the interest of rectifying the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work in this particular area (vii). The term 'subaltern' equated with 'inferior rank', is deployed as a nomenclature for the general attribute of subordination whether expressed in 'terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way' (vii). Following Gramsci, '*Notes on Italian History*,' subordination is perceived as a constitutive element in a binary relationship in which the other constitutive element is dominance, consequently, 'subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up' (Gramsci, 1971 : 55). Guha's introductory comments frame the agenda for the series, and within this article I shall explore the commitment to the expressed aim with reference to gender.

Despite Gayatri Spivak's endorsement of the subaltern groups 'scrupulous consideration of women' (volume IV) the actual evidence is less compelling. Certainly, as Veena Das claims, the subaltern scholars are concerned to displace western anthropologists and historians as subject of discourse in favour of the subaltern as subject of history but, in the main, the subaltern is male and rural. The subaltern project entails a shift away from the centrality of labour in general, and the proletariat in particular. In emphasizing the manner in which predominantly rural male subalterns engage with forms of domination eg law, bureaucracy, police, medicine etc., the contributors undoubtedly challenge traditional anthropological perspectives on tribes and castes. Instances of female subaltern encounters with power are few, as are indications of gender awareness on the part of many contributors. There are significant exceptions which warrant consideration.

In a discussion of land rights and social oppression in Bihar 1947 - 1978, Arvind Das (volume II, 1983) introduces a theme taken up by feminists,⁸ namely, the sexual exploitation of *dalit* women by rich peasants and landlords. From 1967 onwards in Nema village (Patna District) there were struggles by mainly *dalit* landless labourers and poor peasants over the right to a minimum wage. Against this backdrop, the rape of women

by landowners and police was so widespread that village girls had difficulty in finding husbands. In one of only three chapters in the six volumes on urban labour, Dipesh Chakrabarty (volume II, 1983), writing on jute workers in Calcutta 1890-1940, illustrates how the Government of Bengal and the jute mill owners conspired to inhibit the internalization of the notion of equality before the law and formal freedom of contract by the migrant rural jute workers. Working conditions in the jute mills were not objects of Government knowledge. Rules were lax, and little value was attributed to worker's lives. Workers were victims of numerous accidents. Women died when loose-fitting clothing caught in the machinery.

The Das and Chakrabarty chapters in volume II (1983) certainly illustrate the subordination of women in unequal binary relationships of power, and the gender sensitivity of the two authors. What is unclear, however, is whether there is any suggestion in the documentary sources that women actively engaged with the particular forms of domination. Is there, for the women, a 'moment of rebellion'? How, if at all, is it constituted? The 'moment of rebellion', however, is central to Chakrabarty's analysis of trade unions (volume III) in the Calcutta jute mines between 1920 and 1950, in which he analyses the role of a woman - Prabhavati Das Gupta - in the leadership of the 1929 strike. Das Gupta was a young Bengali woman committed to the interests of the working class and, as a key leader of The Bengal Jute Worker's Union, she was able to effectively organize the workers in strike action. Das Gupta's considerable influence on the workers was not so much a consequence of organizational skill, but rather her inspirational capacity to ignite and sustain mass action at the 'moment of rebellion'.

David Arnold's analysis of peasant consciousness and peasant action during the Madras famine 1876-1878 (volume III) effectively integrates the gender dimension in relation to rain-making ceremonies,⁹ relief, prostitution, looting and suicide. In many small town disturbances rural labourers, frequently *dalits*, joined with other subalterns in looting grain stores. In one instance in December 1876 in the market town of Kalladaikurichi (Tirunelveli District) between 400 to 500 people, women included, looted stores. For Arnold, the crisis of famine is seen as a win-

dow on subaltern consciousness and action. As famine conditions become more acute, however, any apparent village solidarity collapses: reciprocity crumbles under conditions founded not on mutual exchange but inequality.

Not until volume V, following Spivak's volume IV endorsement - ironically, the first contribution by a woman - does gender emerge as a significant theme. Even here, Spivak remains the sole female contributor to the series. Paralleling Arnold's analysis of struggles in Madras, David Hardiman explores the role of women in Bhil protests against rising prices and grain shortages during the 1899 famine in Eastern Gujarat. Arnold's own contribution focuses on the 1896-1900 plague in the Bombay Presidency. Extending Foucault's analogy between prison and hospital to the colonial context, Arnold emphasizes the importance of isolation in the interests of control, reform, and cure. Certainly, Foucault's delineation of separation and enclosure - in maintaining control and upholding power differentials - is manifested in a variety of colonial locations and forms. In Arnold's analysis, the plague dramatized the importance of the body - the body of the colonized - as site of the conflict between colonial power and indigenous politics. Indian and colonial perceptions of the plague administration reflected a struggle over control of the indigenous body, and the power of the rulers in controlling that body. The predominant western perception of the hospital as a disease free, sanitized environment was at variance with the Indian perception of 'a place of pollution, contaminated by blood and faeces, and transgressing norms of caste, religion, and purdah' (1987:62). The 'moment of rebellion' occurred on October 29th 1896 when around 1,000 mill-hands attacked Bombay's Arthur Road hospital after a woman worker, suspected of plague, was forcibly admitted. In this example, the degradation of the woman at the hands of the authorities was a poignant symbolic expression of the degradation of a colonized people.

The Foucauldian influence is also evident in Ranajit Guha's account of 'Chandra's Death' (volume V), in which a specific event is approached through the analysis of the official construction of documentary narratives, and in which the confession is seen as an expression of relations of

power and control (Doty, 1996). Guha's reconstruction of events are based on an incident occurring in Bengal, in which a woman (Chandra) died following an abortion, in the year 1849 (Bengali year 1255). Chandra's death was inadvertently procured by her sister who, in evidence, recounted obtaining, preparing and administering the fatal dose of medicine in the expectation of precipitating the abortion. Ironically Chandra, a widow impregnated and abandoned by her lover, was killed by the very act aimed at saving her from a living death as social outcast. Guha's rendition of the episode, in which the feckless lover demanded that the termination take place, exemplifies the subordination of women to patriarchal structures of law, family, and religion. As Veena Das (Volume VI) has noted, Guha's exploration of the judicial discourse is illustrative in depicting patriarchal assertion over the female subject(s). Ultimately, no guilt is attributed to the lover, while the female relatives' supportive act is deemed criminal.

Spivak (Volume V), in a heady theoretical pot pourri incorporating Foucault, Derrida, Barthes, Lacan, Marx, Gramsci and others, engages in a reconstructivist literary representation of a work, *Standayini* (Breast Giver), written by the Bengal woman writer Mahasweta Devi and translated by Spivak. *Standayini* is a poignant account of Jashoda the professional mother who, having succoured some fifty children, died of breast cancer. In Mahasweta Devi's original story, *Standayini* is a parable of decolonized India, an allegory of India exploited and abused by the very classes sworn to protect her. Spivak doesn't much like this allegorical interpretation, favouring her own narrative in which Jashoda is the subaltern constituted as gendered subject. In this reconstructed account a dense post-modernist analysis is interpolated by Marx' distinction between use value/exchange value (the milk produced for one's own children/ the milk produced for exchange) and necessary labour/surplus labour (production for one's own children/production for the children of the master's family). Here, Spivak's plea that 'Marxian and feminism must become persistent interruptions of each other' (104) is less than convincing.

Volume VI of *Subaltern Studies* was the final work edited by Guha, and in his chapter on 'Dominance Without Hegemony', he explores power

in colonial India through the interaction of dominance and subordination. For Guha, dominance/subordination is a relation constituted by components whose idioms - order and *Danda* are derived from two distinct paradigms of political culture (British, and pre-colonial Indian). The pre-colonial Indian idiom *Danda* - an ensemble of power, authority and punishment, deriving from the laws of *Manu* - is identified with the king and the male. It is a manifestation of divine will in state affairs, and exercised through the entitlement of landlords over tenants, *panchayats*, and patriarchal moral codes. On one level, the introduction by Guha of gender in the context of Hindu mythology, coincides with the discussions found in Dumont and early Srinivas. However, Guha's objective is quite different in that he introduces gender in order to illustrate, as with the myths of Krishna and the *gopis* (milkmaids) of Vraj, the primacy of the male in the sexual politics of a patriarchal society. The *gopis* are denied any independent sexual pleasure, their role is merely to nurture and please their lord. Women's inherent nature thereby transcends eroticism and is expressed, through the ideology of submission and subordination, in acts of unquestioning devotion. This takes us straight back to the Brahmanical idealized view of appropriate wifely behaviour recorded, without critical comment, in the works of early Srinivas and Dumont.

There is a current fashion amongst certain post-modernist feminists to criticize the work of feminist activists on gender and the representation of women. This tendency is exemplified in Julie Stephens' strange contribution ('Feminist, Fictions: A Critique of the Category Non-Western Woman in Feminist Writings on India') to volume VI which, as Susie Tharu (volume VI) observes, 'degenerates into a moral stick to beat feminists' (p.131). Stephens, in deconstructivist mode, is at great pains to demonstrate that feminism collides and colludes with the discourse of Orientalism.¹¹ Both nationalist (exemplified by Kishwar and Vanita (eds), 1984) and non-nationalist (exemplified by Omvedt, 1980) variants are singled out for attack.. Both sets of authors apparently engage in stereotyping the women whose voices they seek to represent. The nationalists, by portraying and endorsing a mythic idealized view of Indian womanhood; and the non-nationalist by

drawing a picture of the militant, tribal activist breaking through police lines. Stephens claims that both approaches, via direct speech, are structured to conform to a true feminist consciousness. Indian women, elite and subaltern, have become objects of feminists' gaze, and feminists are 'blind to their own image making' (p. 93). The two perspectives constitute the female subject (Indian women) in different ways. In the non-nationalist depiction of Omvedt, middle class women are denied an autonomous role in history: they are somehow less authentic, less 'subjects in their own right than tribals, peasants, or women from urban slums' (p. 107). Well! This seems a rather extraordinary critique from a contributor to a series in which the expressed aim is to privilege subaltern groups. Of course, as Guha proclaims in the Preface (Volume I), the term subaltern is used in the series as a general attribute of subordination whether expressed 'in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way'. Nonetheless, non-elite women are subject to greater degrees of subordination precisely because of their objective location in intersecting structures of economic, political, cultural and sexual power. Here, Stephens seems to have problems in comprehending a *reality* in which tribal and low caste women are engaged in ongoing toil, and struggles - and I am not simply talking barricades - of one form or another against their multi-layered oppression. Ultimately, the writer, as subject, does mediate between the investigated subject and the text. This applies to Spivak, Stephens and other deconstructivists as it does to those associated with *Manushi* and Omvedt. However, *Manushi* and Omvedt - in spite of their differences - view feminism not simply as a discourse, but as a vehicle for change. In this, they stand apart from Stephens.

Omvedt's early work *We Will Smash This Prison: Indian Women in Struggle* (1980) provides Stephens with what she sees as a prime example of the assumed fallacy in which the feminist left claim to speak for 'real woman'. At a substantive level, Stephens succeeds in misrepresenting Omvedt's portrayal of Indian women as exclusively slum dwellers, *adivasis*, and/or peasants. First, Omvedt interacted with a variety of Indian women engaged in protest activity and radical politics in Maharashtra including: agricultural

labourers, urban workers, college students, bank employees, some of whom were Brahmins (1980: 5). Secondly, Omvedt is cautiously circumspect about the level of political organization underlying women's activism identifying, in the case of middle class women (students and employees), a 'lack of solidarity and the absence of a common perspective' (p. 163); and in the case of working class and rural women, a lack of independent grass roots organizations. Thirdly, Omvedt acknowledges that the women with whom she interacted were not typical i.e. were neither representative of a generalized category of Indian womanhood, nor randomly selected. They were, as she indicates (1980: 5) women from an area with a strong tradition of revolt, who were involved in organization and protest activity. This is the sense in which their voices *are* authentic. Stephens' analysis mirrors that of Spivak (1988) for whom Omvedt is characterized as, the radical activist investigating subject, unable to transcend her own positionality. For both Stephens and Spivak the narrative (of India women) is reconstructed to conform to a 'true feminist consciousness' (Stephens). The subaltern cannot speak. In true Foucauldian style, the articulation of the women's voice is a product of the author function: the author manages the discourse. One major problem with this type of analysis, highlighted in Susie Tharu's critique of Stephens, is that ideology as expression of class interest gives way to a notion of ideology that is discursively produced and *that* production, in the case of Omvedt's works, is subject to simplistic caricature and parody. What is entirely missed is the acknowledgement that Omvedt and myriad other feminists illustrate how women, from different backgrounds, engage with forms of domination.

The depiction of women's engagement with forms of domination plays no central role in the *Subaltern Studies* project, yet Stephens is peculiarly silent about the analysis of gender in that context. What is surprising, then, is the eagerness of Stephens to critique feminists while failing to address and assess the gender dimension of the series. My aim in this piece, is to redress the balance by beginning to explore the approaches to the general attribute of subordination (Guha, volume I, vii) with specific reference to gender.

NOTES

1. Examples include: Bakker, 1994; Elsoned, 1991; Jahan, 1995; Kabeer, 1994; Scott, 1995.
2. An early exception, which acknowledges the very significant role of women in production, is that of Boserup, 1970.
3. An alternative perspective is depicted in the film, *Sati*, by the Bengal director Aparna Sen. Here, the ritual marriage (to a tree) of a handicapped woman, takes place in the interests of the family economy and religious propriety.
4. Variations on the tradition/modernity, sanskritization/westernization themes abound in the literature (eg: Miller 1975, Singh 1977, Kolenda 1986). For a modified version, rejecting the assumption that the acquisition of modern values and education enhance women's freedom and independence, see Liddle and Joshi 1986. The observation they make, which also emerges in Sharma 1980 and Desai 1996, is that within the modernity frame, women remain subordinated to patriarchal structures of dominance in which the patriarchal family appropriates the social status of the women's profession for the purpose of enhancing its own position.
5. Spivak, along with many contemporary intellectuals, including feminists, is influenced by Foucault 1972, 1978, on discourse.
6. Dorothy Stein 1982 has also analyzed traditionalists and modernizers in the *sati* debate, via Ram Mohan Roy's 1818 pamphlet which assumed the form of a fictional debate between advocate and opponent of the practice. Unlike Mani and Spivak, Stein portrays the women *sati* exclusively as victims.
7. Translated from 'subalterno' and drawn from Antonio Gramsci's analysis of the role of subordinate classes in hegemonic rule (see *Prison Notebooks*, 1971)
8. See, for instance; Mies, 1976, 1983; Omvedt, 1978; Everett, 1986. Other works - including that of the *Stree Shakti Sanghatana*, 1989; Custers, 1987; Chew, 1991 - focus on the role of women in rural uprisings.
9. In relation to rain-making ceremonies, Arnold describes the reversal of the conventional gender roles in a ceremony in which women washed and held the plough (1984: 73).
10. Within the colonial context, the control of discursive space (eg, Government acts regulating relations between employers and servants) reinforced the control over physical space. During the struggle for independence from British rule in Kenya, a villagization programme was introduced. Freedom fighters and sympathizers were sent to detention camps, and trenches were dug

around villages to maintain their isolation (see Doty, 1996).

11. The notion of Orientalism has been discussed at length elsewhere (Said, 1978; Turner, 1978; Inden, 1990 etc). In Said's original analysis, the discourse of Orientalism was essentially a discourse of power - generated by Orientalist scholars, social theorists and colonial administrators - which characterized a set of social, economic, and political relationships between Europe and the colonies.

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