

Indian and Western Feminist Traditions: A Comparative Study of Early Writings

Abstract

The present paper attempts to carry out a cross-cultural comparative study of feminist writings of the East and the West through the study of Tarabai Shinde's "Stri Purush Tulana", Pandita Ramabai's *High-Caste Hindu Woman* and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*. Through the study of the selected texts originated at different locations, this paper examines the differences of political, economic and socio-cultural antecedents leading to the movements for the cause of women. Drawing upon the ideas presented in Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism without Borders*, this paper draws attention to limitations of monolithic concept of universal womanhood. The present paper does not only underscore the differences in but also attempts to identify common structures and causes of gender oppression as observed in two different cultural contexts. A comparative analysis of the selected texts shows that despite the presence of some similarities the idea of essential womanhood cannot be posited because of differences of class, race, age, sexuality, nationality and caste.

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Introduction

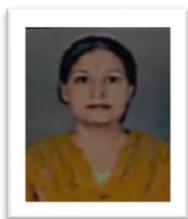
The very notion that there exists a prototypical woman who can be described in ways that reflect and have meaning for the lives of many different women living in very different geographical, economic, political and social settings needs to be challenged - Ruth Hubbard (qtd. in Gagnier 24).

Aim of the Study

The present paper attempts to carry out a cross-cultural comparative study of feminist writings of the East and the West through the study of Tarabai Shinde's "Stri Purush Tulana", Pandita Ramabai's *High-Caste Hindu Woman* and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*. Through the study of the selected texts originated at different locations, this paper examines the differences of political, economic and socio-cultural antecedents leading to the movements for the cause of women. Drawing upon the ideas presented in Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism without Borders*, this paper draws attention to limitations of monolithic concept of universal womanhood. The present paper does not only underscore the differences in but also attempts to identify common structures and causes of gender oppression as observed in two different cultural contexts. A comparative analysis of the selected texts shows that despite the presence of some similarities the idea of essential womanhood cannot be posited because of differences of class, race, age, sexuality, nationality and caste.

Review of Literature

Many thinkers and scholars have criticized the imposition of classical western theory of feminism by comparing feminist writings of the East and the West. Feminist thinkers like Mohanty in *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* published in 2003 challenged the essentialism by opposing the generalization of women of third world based on western feminist theory. Similarly, in 1986, Kumari Jayawardena's *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* emphasizes the need to study gender discrimination identifying women with national culture. Works of Rekha Pande (2009), Anupama Choudhary (2009) and Padma Anagol (2016) have traced the history of Indian feminism. Vidyut Bhagwat in "Marathi Literature as a Source for Contemporary Feminism" published in 1995, critiques the classical notion of women as depicted in hegemonic texts and traces the history of movement of feminism in Maharashtra. The present research paper aims at the study of culture specific gender discrimination as depicted in early feminist writings.



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The present paper attempts to carry out a cross-cultural comparative study of feminist writings of the East and the West to find out how feminism has evolved in different socio-cultural-political environments. The texts selected for study are Tarabai Shinde's "Stri Purush Tulana" (1882) translated as *A Comparison between Women and Men* by Rosalind O'Hanlon in 1994, Pandita Ramabai's *High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1886) and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman* (1792). Texts by Shinde and Ramabai belong to colonial India and represent an early phase of indigenous feminism whereas Mary Wollstonecraft is a pioneering critic in the domain of western feminism. The present paper aims to study the emergence of feminist thinking in the context of the growing desire for social justice and literary and political movements in different sets of socio-cultural and political realities. In other words, through the study of the selected texts originated at different locations, this paper examines the differences of political, economic and socio-cultural antecedents leading to the movements for the cause of women.

Drawing upon the ideas presented in Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism without Borders*, this paper draws attention to limitations of monolithic concept of universal womanhood as promulgated in the Western theory of feminism. The analysis of the selected texts is based on culture specific perspectives of gender-based discriminations. In their critiques of oppression perpetrated against women within particular geographical, cultural, religious, ethnic and sexual histories, the selected texts appear to pose a challenge to the concept of essentialism. The present paper acknowledges the incidence of oppression against women as endemic in the history of modern as well as traditional societies. The analysis of the selected texts draws attention to the day to day practices of survival and resistance against the structures of privilege/oppression in different cultures. The differences of socio-cultural backgrounds in which these texts are located reveal different genealogies of oppression against the gendered subaltern.

The juxtaposition of feminist writers of the East and the West also showcases the possibility of alliances between feminist writings of the two vastly different worlds. The present paper does not only underscore the differences in but also attempts to identify common structures and causes of gender oppression as observed in two different cultural contexts. In *Feminism without Borders* Mohanty brings into focus the significance of the study of dissimilarities in experiences of women located in different societies:

In knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining. The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how

specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully (226).

Following Mohanty's contention it can be stated that while gender discrimination is universal the ways of its execution vary due to the variation in socio-cultural contexts.

To study the selected texts, a proper analysis of socio-cultural backgrounds in which these literary creations were produced is essential. Tarabai Shinde was born in a high caste Maratha family in the village of Buldhana in central India. Her father Bapuji Hari Shinde, a head clerk in the office of the Deputy Commissioner was a member of Jotiba Phule's "Satyashodhak Samaj". Her father's reformist attitude provided Shinde an opportunity to learn to read and write, not only in Marathi, but to some extent in English and Sanskrit also. Shinde was married early, but to a "gharjavai" (a husband who stayed with his in-laws), "unlike the usual practice, where wives left their natal homes and were absorbed into the husband's households" (O'Hanlon 5). Tarabai Shinde's husband died early, leaving her a childless widow, a curse for any Indian woman of her time. "Stri Purush Tulana" was the only work that she wrote.

Pandita Ramabai was born in 1858 to the couple Anant Shastri Dongre and Lakshmbai in the forest of Gungamal, in the Western Ghats of India. Her father, a religious reformer was a man of liberal thinking and favoured female education. Thus, Ramabai could get education and learned various languages of India like Marathi, Hindustani, Bengali and Sanskrit. Her faith in Hinduism was shaken after the death of her parents and she embraced Christianity few years later. During her journeys in India, she got various opportunities to observe the pathetic condition of high-caste Hindu widows trapped in situations of orthodoxies. Moved by their wretched situation, she resolved to make every possible effort for their emancipation.

Mary Wollstonecraft was born in London in 1759. Her unorthodox life hemming love affairs, illegitimate children and suicide attempts earned her social disapproval and notoriety. After working as a teacher, governess and as a translator, she decided to be a writer. Her decision to enter the literary sphere for economic independence at the age of twenty seven was quite unusual for a woman of her age. Writing political tracts in the eighteenth century was indeed an exclusively male activity. Her monumental book length essay *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published in 1792. She published several other works including *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), *Mary* (1788), *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1795).

Tarabai Shinde's "Stri Purush Tulana", published in 1882 came as a reaction to an article that appeared in *Pune Vaibhav* concerning the death sentence announced by the court for a young widow named Vijayalakshmi for the crime of infanticide. The same verdict which gave capital punishment to Vijayalakshmi acquitted the man who was equally

responsible for the abortion of illegitimate child to escape social ignominy. Shinde described her own work as an attempt to highlight the discriminatory practices of patriarchy:

God brought this amazing universe into being, and he it was also who created men and women both. So is it true that only women's bodies are home to all kinds of wicked vices? Or have men got just the same faults as we find in women? I wanted this to be shown absolutely clearly, and that's the reason I've written this small book, to defend the honor of my entire sister countrywomen (Bhaginivarg) (O'Hanlon 75).

Ramabai's *High-Caste Hindu Woman* is grounded in the realities of Indian socio-cultural life. Growing up in an environment of acute demarcations of caste, religion, class and gender, she became conscious of socio-cultural barriers and responded to her perception of a fractured world through *The High Caste Hindu Woman*. Ideas related to anti fanaticism of religion and anti casteism find a highly pronounced enunciation in this work. Though written in English, the first edition of this work sold out ten thousand copies. This work had a remarkable international circulation reaching Western audiences including the United States.

Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman* came as a reaction to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord's report to the French national assembly stating the need of only domestic education for women. Through this work, she fights for the rightful place for women in the sphere of education and literature. She questioned moral restrictions of gendered behaviour imposed on women resulting in their domestication. She contributed to female emancipation by questioning the philosophical ideas of Edmund Burke and Rousseau on the issue of femininity. Her complaint concerns the failure of male philosophers to accommodate women in their visions of a new bourgeois society as their ideals for financial independence and individual accomplishment did not apply to women. She exposes the ways in which male representation of women in literature strengthened and justified the marginalized status reserved for them. Thus, through her work, she laid the foundation of radical change and feminine agency.

The difference of location from where women speak makes their voices multi-phonetic. Both Shinde and Ramabai belonged to a country that was colonized whereas Wollstonecraft was a member of a nation that was engaged in a mad scramble for colonies. While Wollstonecraft's work has a clear emphasis on individualism and individual freedom, Shinde and Ramabai's works are actuated by institutional prejudices. Thus, the causes of emergence of feminism in India were different from those of in the West. The presence of colonial rule also became one of the main factors responsible for the origin of the movement for the cause of women. The leading feminist historian Padma Anagol, in her work *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850-*

1920 traces the origin of feminism as arising "through a combination of factors, such as the presence of a colonial economy, the new web of modernizing impulses which interacted with the contending circumstances and criteria of sex, race, status, class, caste and religion" (Anagol 13).

The rise of women's movement in the UK and the US can be said to possess a different orientation as compared to the rise of feminist consciousness in India. Various forms of patriarchal restrictions in the western society subjugated women and deprived them of their rights. In the West, movement for the cause of women was initiated both through theoretical as well as political interventions. The early phase of feminism in the West focussed on legal issues, primarily on gaining women's right to vote. The suffragette movement for the rights of women to vote spiralled to enfold issues concerning economic, reproductive and sexual matters. Women activists and thinkers in the late 19th to early 20th centuries became conscious of the need to attain political power for social change.

The emergence of feminist movement in the nineteenth century India can be studied in conjunction with issues of social, economic and cultural transformation. In this context, Anupama Choudhary observes: "In our country, feminism has emerged not as theory but from the real problems faced by women" (34). Social activists and political leaders like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Phule and Keshav Chandra Sen strove for the abolition of social evils like *sati*, child marriage and the ban on remarriage of upper caste Hindu widows. Some of the works by women writers like Shinde and Ramabai challenged the stereotypical image of women in some radical ways. Thus from the brief over-view of the Indian women's movements, it can be stated that feminism in India emerged out of external as well as internal socio-historical realities. Writing on the subject of emergence of feminism in South Asia, Kumari Jayawardena categorically states that feminism was not "imposed" on the Third World by the West. On the contrary it was the product of the historical circumstances that brought about "ideological changes affecting women" (Jayawardena 2).

Despite the indifference of society, adverse material circumstances, exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance and the dominance of male literary tradition, all the selected writers began to give expression to their experience of social injustice and discrimination through their writings. Their attainment of voice through textual creativity was the first step towards the assertion of identity. Writing on the subject, Mohanty opines: "Writing often becomes the context through which new political identities are forged. It becomes a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself. If the everyday world is not transparent written texts are also the basis of the exercise of power and domination" (78). The individual efforts made by early feminist writers and thinkers like Ramabai, Shinde and Wollstonecraft drew attention to socially constructed oppressive gender roles resulting in gender inequality.

The texts of all the selected writers are often considered to be the foundational works of feminism. Tarabai Shinde's work lays bare the female representation by men in Sanskrit and regional literature and religious scriptures. It is through her work that she enters into a contest with them. Vidyut Bhagwat considers her to be the first Indian feminist literary critic: "Her bold exposure of patriarchal oppression was so far ahead of her times that the public lapse of memory in this case cannot be an accident... She has the distinction of being the first Indian feminist literary critic" (Bhagwat 27). Similarly Ramabai's *High-Caste Hindu Woman* and Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman* too laid the foundation for radical change. Literary creations of all the selected writers are feminist in nature. Offen defines such works as those that "recognize and exhibit consciousness of, discomfort at or even anger over institutionalized injustice towards womanhood as created by patriarchal thought and finally they aim towards eliminating that injustice that upholds male prerogatives in that particular culture" (Offen 152).

Gender discrimination is universal and it occupies the attention of all the selected writers. Ramabai's *High-Caste Hindu Woman* reveals that the preference for a male child in Indian patriarchal system is the basis of gender discrimination:

A son is the most coveted of all blessings that a Hindu craves, for it is by a son's birth in the family that the father is redeemed.... Fathers very seldom wish to have daughters, for they are thought to be the property of somebody else; besides, a daughter is not supposed to be of any use to the parents in their old age. Although it is necessary for the continuance of the race that some girls should be born into the world, it is desirable that their number by no means should exceed that of the boys. If unfortunately a wife happens to have all daughters and no son, Manu authorizes the husband of such a woman to supersede her with another in the eleventh year of their marriage (7).

Commenting on the undesirability for daughters in India leading to the heinous practice of infanticide among Rajputs of North and North-western and Central India, Ramabai states in *High-Caste Hindu Woman*: "This cruel act was performed by the fathers themselves, or even by mothers, at the command of the husband whom they are bound to obey in all things" (9).

Focussing on the politics of everyday life, all the selected texts delineate the control of sexual, cultural and religious beliefs over the routine life of both men and women. The fear of denunciation by one's family and social group restricts one from crossing the barriers of gendered behaviour. *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman* exhibits the socially approved gendered behaviour resulting in the

objectification of girls by offering them a world of confinement: "The child is not left a moment to its own direction – particularly a girl-and thus rendered dependent. Dependence is called natural"(28). Indian philosophy too emphasizes the need for the protection of woman all her life by any of the male members of her family. Similarly, western society of Wollstonecraft's time period also feels the need for the male shelter for women: "Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, *outward* obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man...." (15-16). Boys and girls are schooled to follow socially approved patterns of behaviour as Wollstonecraft observes:

Taught from their infancy that beauty is women's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming around its gilt cage, only seeks to adore its prison. Men have various employments and pursuits which engage their attention, and give a character to the opening mind; but women confined to one, and having their thoughts constantly directed to the most insignificant part of themselves, seldom extend their views beyond the triumph of the hour (31).

Marriage was considered to be the only occupation for women in the Eastern as well as in the Western societies. Situation of Indian woman is described in Ramabai's words: "... the popular belief is that a woman can have no salvation unless she be formally married" (10). The similar situation of western woman is delineated in *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman* by Wollstonecraft: "To rise in the world, and have the liberty of running from pleasure to pleasure, they must marry advantageously, and to this object their time is sacrificed, and their persons often legally prostituted" (37). Through *High-Caste Hindu Woman*, Ramabai questions the patriarchal nature of the system of polygamy, where a man has the upper hand of marrying as many wives as he likes. Polygamy resulted in pathetic condition of women, because the death of the single husband meant widowhood for many wives (8-9).

The highly orthodox practice of child-marriage was prevalent in India whereas in the West such a custom was non-existent. In this context, Ramabai writes in *High-Caste Hindu Woman*: "According to Manu, eight years is the minimum, and twelve years of age the maximum marriageable age for a high caste girl. The earlier the act of giving the daughter in marriage, the greater is the merit, for thereby the parents are entitled to rich rewards in heaven" (9). Shinde also writes about the practice of child-marriage prevalent in colonial India: "Many fathers marry off their daughters of ten or eleven, girls who shine like little stars, they marry them for a fat wad of rupees to some rich old man of eighty or ninety" (O' Hanlon 78). The selected works of Shinde

and Ramabai not only portray the helplessness of child brides bearing health risks associated with early sexual activity and child bearing but also oppose blind adherence to social norms leading to their inhuman practice in the name of tradition.

Social institutions like marriage reinforce marginalization of women sanctioned by religious norms. All the selected writers expose the institutionalized exploitation of women through marriage. Shinde critiques the religious scriptures for the glorification of ideal womanhood and exposes the hypocrisy of man-made norms. With a special emphasis on the term "pativrata", she demands that men also need to conform to husband's duties towards their wives: "This is what pativrata (devoted to the husband) means these days.... Who on earth really follows the shastras to the letter or expects anyone else to? If the husband is really to be like a god to the wife, then shouldn't he behave like one (O'Hanlon 81)? Similarly, Wollstonecraft also seems to challenge the superior position of husbands: "The *divine right* of husbands, like the divine rights of kings, may, it is to be hoped, in this enlightened age, be contested without danger; and though conviction may not silence many boisterous disputants, yet, any prevailing prejudice is attacked, the wise will consider, and leave the narrow-minded to rail with thoughtless vehemence at innovation" (27).

High-Caste Hindu Woman throws light on the plight of the upper caste widows. With not many resources to live on, they had to choose either death by burning themselves on the pyre along with their husbands through the practice of sati or lead a severe life of austerity and penance sanctioned by the Shastras. A high caste Hindu widow could be granted life if she followed the norms of purity such as vegetarianism, teetotalism and tight constraints on sexuality and code of conduct as described by Manu: "At her pleasure let her emancipate her body by living on pure flowers, roots and fruit; but she must never even mention the name of another man after her husband died" (qtd. in *High-Caste Hindu Woman* 17). In Ramabai's words, the self-immolation of widows known as *sati* was regarded as a sublime act: "Not only was the woman assured of her getting into heaven by this sublime act, but also that by this great sacrifice she would secure salvation to herself and husband, and to their families to the seventh generation" (*High-Caste Hindu Woman* 17). Shinde's essay "Stri-Purush Tulana" written in Marathi, in spite of limited circulation, furthered the cause of widow remarriage and women's education to liberate them from orthodox patriarchy.

The reification of motherhood in Indian orthodoxy confined women to their reproductive roles. In this context, Ramabai writes: "The honour bestowed upon the mother is without parallel in any other country. Although the woman is looked upon as an inferior being, the mother is nevertheless the chief person and worthy to receive all honour from the son" (*High-Caste Hindu Woman* 13). *High-Caste Hindu Woman* underlines the way disproportionate glorification of motherhood as per Manu's religious commands for upholding orthodoxy led to persecution

of childless women in Ramabai's age: "A barren wife may be superseded in the eighth year, she whose children all die in the tenth, she who bears only daughters in the eleventh, but she who is quarrelsome without delay" (15). Thus, a woman unable to fulfill reproductive duties was worthless for her family as her fecundity was her identity.

Indian notions of femininity during the colonial times can be described and defined in terms of ideologies of seclusion, notions of protectionism and relational politics resulting in domestication of women. Shinde's *A Comparison between Women and Men* is a critique of emphasis placed on feminine modesty and chastity imposed through the seclusion of women in 'marathmola'. Quoting Manu's philosophy, Ramabai too brings into notice the undue importance given to isolation of women so that family honour may be protected: "Women must particularly be guarded against evil inclinations, however trifling they may appear; for if they are not guarded, they will bring sorrow on two families....Considering that the highest duty of all castes, even weak husbands must strive to guard their wives" (*High-Caste Hindu Woman* 14). Wollstonecraft also underscores the moral standards of patriarchal mindset of her society: "If the honour of a woman, as it is absurdly called, be safe, she may neglect every social duty...." (66). By redefining masculine and feminine virtues, she exposes the double standards inherent in their popular use.

All the writers under study believed that emancipation of women could be achieved through means of education. Wollstonecraft observed that the intellectual world was shut against women (38) and they were especially discouraged from getting education as they were expected to remain confined to the private sphere: "Led by their dependent situation and domestic employments more into society, what they learn is rather by snatches; and as learning is with them in general only a secondary thing, they do not pursue any one branch with that persevering ardour necessary to give vigour to the faculties and clearness to the judgment" (19). Although Wollstonecraft confines women to traditional roles yet she believes that educated women could contribute to the nation's growth unlike the uneducated ones who were not capable enough to bring up their children properly: "Can they be expected to govern a family with judgment, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world" (5)? Ramabai too has given expression to similar views: "I solemnly believe that this hated and despised class of women, educated and enlightened, are by God's grace to redeem India" (*High-Caste Hindu Woman* 5).

Both Ramabai and Wollstonecraft laid stress on the limitations of female education as it was designed to cater to the needs of patriarchy. Rekha Pande argues that education for girls in India was a means to govern the feminine behaviour: "Thus education for girls was not meant to equip them to be self-sufficient, independent, emancipated and train them to follow some profession, but to be good housewives, the mistress of the home and the hearth"

(Pande 28). Wollstonecraft propagated female education but seemed to be dissatisfied with the ideology of thinkers like Rousseau and his followers who "have warmly inculcated that the whole tendency of female education ought to be directed to one point – to render them pleasing" (21).

All the selected writers advocate equal status for women as Wollstonecraft says: "... this virtuous equality will not rest firmly even when founded on a rock, if one-half of mankind be chained to its bottom by fate, for they will be continuing undermining it through ignorance or pride" (73). The age of Wollstonecraft was under the influence of Rousseau's philosophy of an ideal democratic society based on the equality of men. Rousseau excluded women and thus they were discriminated against. Wollstonecraft expanded Rousseau's concept of democratic society but she laid emphasis on gender equality. She opposed discriminatory practices of patriarchy that "restrained women from entering into more important concerns by political and civil oppression" (87). She appeals for the emancipation of women: "It is time to affect a revolution in female manners – time to restore to them their lost dignity – and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world" (32). Writing in response to the Vijaylakshmi's case, Shinde also supports the equality of the sexes:

I'm doing it out of the hope that you might stop treating all women as though they had committed a crime and making their lives a hell.... But everyday now we have to look at some new and more horrible example of men who are really wicked and their shameless lying tricks. And not a single person says anything about it. Instead people go about pinning the blame on women all the time (O'Hanlon 77).

A comparative analysis of the selected texts shows that despite the presence of some similarities the idea of essential womanhood cannot be posited because of differences of class, race, age, sexuality, nationality and caste. Examining the selected texts from cultural perspective, it can be said that women in most cultures were disadvantaged. In both eastern as well as western societies women were oppressed due to prevalent sexist culture where men were more powerful. Linking women's oppression to political, social and cultural values, it can be stated that women located in different socio-cultural environments do not experience the same disadvantages. Since women of different backgrounds have interconnected experiences particularities of experience sometimes become universally significant as bell hooks writes in *Feminist Theory from Centre to Margin*:

Women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to

fight equally to end oppression. We do not need anti-male sentiments to bond us together, so great is the wealth of experience, culture, and ideas we have to share with one another. We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity (67).

Conclusion

Thus, the study of different forms of gender based discrimination as depicted in the selected texts is not aimed at denial of universal concept of sisterhood based on shared experience of oppression. It is an extension of the concept of universal womanhood linking it to socio-cultural values concerning gender. All the selected writers having observed the institutionalized exploitation of women raised their voice for the emancipation of women through their writings in their own way.

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