

Article: A Global Perspective on Gender: What's
South Asia Got to Do with It?

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A Global Perspective on Gender

What's South Asia Got to Do with It?

THE QUESTION THAT ANIMATES my essay is this: what might it mean to bring a global perspective to gender? The familiar understanding of gender, as having to do with a perceived binary construction of man and woman, derives, arguably, from a particular historical and geographical context: the modern period in northwestern Europe and North America. Yet *this* particular meaning of gender is now not only widely recognized as a “useful category of historical analysis” but also routinely extended, without any significant modification, to different contexts as the default understanding of gender.¹ What are the implications of making a particular conception of gender universal? What does it mean to extend a parochial, albeit familiar, understanding of gender to times and places other than those that gave rise to it in the first place? These are some of the stakes in the desire to reimagine gender from a global perspective.

The call to reappraise gender from a global perspective might seem, at first glance, to be somewhat redundant. After all, we have now had several decades of scholarship on gender focusing on almost every conceivable area of the world. Moreover, we now also have a sizable body of scholarship devoted to the potential and specific problems of integrating gender both in the research and in the teaching of fields such as world and/or global history. In the wake of this vast body of scholarship on gender in global contexts, the call to bring a global perspective

to gender might seem somewhat belated: a johnny-come-lately or a Janaki, as the case may be. Surely a global perspective on gender by now is an imperative rather than a proposition. Let me clarify the stakes by framing my point somewhat differently: while we certainly have a great deal of scholarship on women's and gender history *in* global contexts, we have not learned sufficiently from these contexts to begin to open up the concept of gender itself to different meanings. We must distinguish between merely exporting gender as an analytical category to different parts of the world and rethinking the category itself in the light of those different locations. In other words, what do these different global locations contribute to the meaning of gender *theoretically*?

In raising such questions, I am not alone.² Ulrike Strasser and Heidi Tinsman, for example, conclude their essay "Engendering World History" (2005) with a cautionary note: "Given that so many of gender history's analytical categories were first developed for the European context," they write, "how can we make sure that in studying gender systems in other cultures, we do not resort to another form of Eurocentrism, less obvious but more insidious because it is methodological rather than topical?"³ Afsaneh Najmabadi's talk at the thirteenth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women takes up Strasser and Tinsman's challenge in her own appropriately titled "Beyond the Americas? Are Gender and Sexuality Useful Categories of Historical Analysis?"⁴ The analytical project has never been merely about substituting "pure" and "autonomous" non-European alternatives, or "native" categories of analysis, as it were; this, in the wake of the history of European imperialism, would clearly be disingenuous at best. The categories of European political thought, as Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us, are both indispensable and, ultimately, also inadequate for writing Third World histories.⁵ The question, then, is precisely this: how does a global perspective on gender confront the default understanding of gender with its theoretical limits?

A truly global perspective on gender—rather than merely the extension of an *a priori* conception of gender to different parts of the globe—must give theoretical weight to the particular contexts in which it is articulated. It offers, in lieu of an already known understanding of gender, a radically open conception that derives its meaning from the work it does in particular contexts. This shift in the understanding of gender has implications not only for feminist scholarship but also for feminist practice.

To be sure, the argument for expanding the default understanding of gender has been made before. It has been the particular burden, for example, of a variety of “Third World feminisms” that have insisted on the crisscrossing and mutual constitution of gender with other axes of difference, such as class, race, caste, age, nationality, and sexuality, to name only a few.⁶ To be sure, we have been made familiar with the working of gender outside dominant modern European communities; not least, this scholarship has now established the ways in which gender “intersects,” and is “mutually constituted,” by other axes of difference. Valuable as these challenges have been, they do not dislodge gender, in effect, from its privileged association with the binary relationship of men and women. Insofar as this binary understanding—derived from a specifically modern European context—continues as the essential meaning of gender, however expanded, it does not go far enough. The project of fully taking on board that the history of Europe is not exceptional, and not exceptional, above all, in its supposed universality, calls for a still further denaturalization: that is, we must dare to risk the disassociation of gender from its one-dimensional modern European association with binary sexual difference.

Herein lays the ambition of a global perspective on gender. It takes theoretical cognizance of both the nonmodern articulations and the extra-European locations of gender to throw open the meaning of the concept itself. What if the meaning of gender is not singular, after all? What if, in fact, its meaning is radically contextual? The task, then, is to give theoretical weight to the multiplicity of locations in which gender is articulated. This would entail, at the least, making strange what we still too often assume—man/woman—as the proper referent for gender. Once gender is thus liberated from its unnecessary association with any one parochial history, it becomes newly available for a reinvigorated feminist theory and praxis.

The various critiques that have been made over the years of the routine extension to other times and places of a very local and particular conception of gender—*local*, as Jeanne Boydston reminds us, to the cultures of the modern United States and Western Europe—offer useful signposts along the way of thinking gender anew.⁷ Here it may be worth revisiting the controversial arguments made by the Africanists Ifi Amadiume and Oyeronke Oyewumi. To be sure, there is something defensive, and even, perhaps, unquestioningly essentialist, in the logic of their claim: that gender is so

hopelessly compromised by its particular European constitution as to have no relevance for understanding social relations in precolonial Africa. Oyewumi's 1997 book, *The Invention of Women: Making African Sense of Western Gender Discourse*, offered what is, perhaps, the most developed version of this case. She argued on the basis of her study of the Oyo-Yoruba in western Nigeria that the category woman in European society had no equivalent among the Yoruba; and, indeed, that gender was totally absent from precolonial Yoruba society, where the central organizing principle of social relations was not gender but seniority.⁸ Notwithstanding the numerous critiques of her position, it is still possible, without wholly embracing her claim of an unbridgeable gulf between the allegedly gender-obsessed Europeans, on the one hand, and a supposedly gender-free Oyo-Yoruba, on the other, to take on board Oyewumi's central challenge: that is, that modern European-derived gender categories cannot be translated uncritically to understand the social complexities of very differently constituted societies.

Certainly there is other contemporaneous scholarship on Africa that, while using gender analytically, has demonstrated what an illuminating lens it can still be for understanding the organization of power relations in that continent whether in the colonial or in the precolonial periods; but some of the most exciting and innovative work of this type has also followed Oyewumi, at least halfway. In many of these works, for example, age and class figure so prominently in the constitution of gender identities that they allow us to question the relevance of the understanding of gender predominantly in terms of the male-female binary. As Andrea Cornwall notes in a recent review of gender-scholarship on Africa, "The transmutability of gender identities in Africa and the range of relational subject positions taken up by women and men in everyday life reveal a range of identities and identifications that undermine attempts to limit their frames of reference."⁹ The power of this observation does not derive from evidence of the exotic, if by-now-familiar, existence of multiple genders and of multiple sexes. Nor does it derive merely from a theoretical commitment to the poststructuralist deconstruction of that staple of second-wave feminist theorizing: the sex-gender system.¹⁰ Instead, it is rather precisely in the nonexotic ordinary character of the daily practices of gender, the "range of subject positions taken up by women and men in everyday life, that the implications of this scholarship are potentially so devastating to a

unitary (and modern European) understanding of gender as part of a sex-gender schema.

The opportunity to rethink gender comes not necessarily from a theoretical commitment to poststructuralism, but from the intransigent refusal of empirical material to fit a predetermined concept of gender. Some of the anthropological and historical work on Africa has demonstrated the stark gap between a modern European understanding of gender and gender's field of operation; the sheer range, in short, of identifications open to men and women in their everyday lives. This scholarship suggests that women and men, in different places and at different times, have been constituted in relation to a whole range of different forces and not primarily, and definitely not necessarily, only in relation to one another.¹¹ The emphasis here may seem unsettling: the unmooring of gender itself from its natural link to a binary construction of men and women. The cumulative effect of some of the Africa-centered scholarship has been precisely to draw attention away from a priori meanings of gender to gender's "logic of practice" (in Pierre Bourdieu's terms) in different contexts.¹²

The larger point, however, is not merely the predictable one of contrasting theoretical abstractions with the immediacy of practice. It is, rather, about deriving the theoretical abstractions and the conceptual categories—in this case, the concept of gender—from the empirical material itself.¹³ It suggests nothing less than a refusal to foreclose the meaning of gender on the basis of a limited, and limiting, parochial history of the concept in modern Europe. And its potential lies in the possibility of more robust histories of the concept in Europe as elsewhere. Men and women, this line of thinking suggests, are historically and discursively constructed not necessarily only in relation to one another, but also in relation to a variety of other categories, including dominant formulations of the political and social spheres, which are themselves subject to change.¹⁴ This much, at least, has acquired widespread, though certainly not universal, lip service in feminist scholarship. However, the logical implications of this insight—the impossibility of a pre-given meaning of gender or of determining how men and women are constituted in advance of concrete analysis—have been repeatedly, and pointedly, ignored even in some theoretically sophisticated scholarship on gender. Hence, once again, more often than not, a Eurocentric conception of gender emerges by default as the essential meaning of gender; and this predictable and a priori modern European

conception crops up, as such, in scholarship on all time periods and on all parts of the world. Under the circumstances, it is only when the empirical material simply resists being shoehorned into preexisting categories that the radical openness of gender as a category of analysis, or its continued capacity to surprise, becomes partly visible. This is precisely why historical and anthropological scholarship on gender in different parts of the world and in different eras has been so useful to think with.

The examples of a deliberate and self-conscious challenge to gender's typical frame of reference in feminist scholarship thus especially deserve our attention. In her 2005 book, *Women with Moustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, and in pointed reflections both in the book and elsewhere, Afsaneh Najmabadi comments extensively on the process of writing the book and of the journey of discovery it entailed.¹⁵ The process involved *unlearning* many of the unspoken certitudes about gender with which she had approached her project initially. A chance encounter with a wealth of visual material from the period of the Qajar dynasty in Iran led her to go back and read her sources differently. While looking at paintings of heavy-browed women with moustaches and of slim-waisted beardless young men—called *amrads*—she discovered that male and female ideals of beauty were remarkably similar early in this period. Najmabadi deduces evidence of two *different gender* regimes in this encounter. She thus refuses to read *retroactively* the figure of the *amrad*, or the beardless adolescent male, who was the object of male desire; that is, as effeminate or a feminized deviation of masculinity. The *amrad*, as she demonstrates instead, belonged to a different logic of gender in which the point of reference for masculinity was not femininity but an adult male masculinity. Here was an understanding of gender in which *all* gender categories were understood in relation to adult manhood. Such an alternative perspective effectively estranges the prevailing notion of gender.

This initial “discovery” prompted Najmabadi to look at her sources differently and to notice in them a story for which she had not been quite prepared: the gradual “heterosocialization” of gender and of sexual relations—accompanied by the shift to a binary male-female understanding of gender—in the making of an Iranian modernity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “Thinking of gender as man/woman,” Najmabadi concludes, “turned out to be a very modern imperative.”¹⁶ Najmabadi's contribution, indeed, forces us to reconsider the a priori assumptions

about gender that we still too often bring to understanding the social practices in sites away from its particular and parochial enunciation among dominant modern European communities. It offers, at least, the possibility of radically destabilizing our commonly held assumptions about gender through identifying persisting traces of alternative gender regimes as well as by acknowledging the belated and *contingent* nature of the arrival of the taken-for-granted binary understanding of gender.

Once the concept of gender is liberated from its hitherto artificial tethering to a singular geographical location and historical trajectory, it becomes visible as the radically open concept that is suggested by a global perspective. Such a provocation has considerable bearing on giving theoretical cognizance to the particular iterations of gender. This, in turn, has the potential of opening up the fields of feminist scholarship and of feminist praxis anew. The implications of this shift in perspective may be illustrated through some examples from South Asia. Judith Walsh's enormously generative book *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice* (2004), when read against the grain, illustrates the limits of shoehorning the colonial Indian material within an inherited paradigm of gender. Walsh's book explores the Bengali-language incarnation of what is often recognized to be a very nineteenth-century international genre: the domestic manual.¹⁷ Her discussion of Bengali domesticity is especially apposite for my purposes because of its self-consciously global framing. This "global" framing, as I show, both enables and disables some of the most thoughtful and pointed contributions of the book.¹⁸

Walsh frames her analysis of the Bengali-language domestic manuals through the lens of "global domesticity": that is, the transnational circulation of ideas and practices of home and family life. She situates the preoccupations of the Bengali manuals—with such things as systematization, economy, efficiency, and order—alongside similar concerns in other examples of the genre from Britain and the United States. The book thus includes consideration of the famous manual of English domestic life, *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861), the contributions of the nineteenth-century American domestic diva, Catherine Beecher, as well as Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner's guide for British women in India, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888). Walsh is certainly right to note that these British and American texts, especially in their claims to civilizational and national superiority, are not merely the "internal" prod-

ucts of European culture, but, importantly, are “shaped by the civilizing mission of colonialism, now returned home to educate others.”¹⁹ Walsh’s brief foray into British and American domestic manuals serves to complicate any easy characterization of the transnational ideas about home and family life as simply “European” (that is, as internal to, or exclusively of, Europe).

However, the methodological maneuvers of the book do not always keep up with such moments of insight. For example, Walsh ends up pulling her punches on the global provenance of the notions of domesticity. She slips back too quickly into the more conventional view: that the “ideas on home and family life [that] became naturalized in this period as a transnational hegemonic discourse on domestic life” were, in fact, “European.”²⁰ To be sure, Walsh’s focus in the book is not on the deconstruction of the self-contained European provenance of British and American domestic manuals, which form only a minor part of her subject matter. However, this slippage—between the logical conclusions arising out of the empirical information and the dominant interpretive frames used to make sense of them—is symptomatic of a problem that confronts even avowedly global scholarship: the continued persistence of existing European-derived conceptual paradigms even in the context of an expanded global unit of analysis.

This has some unintentional consequences. Walsh draws our attention to an important difference between the Euro-American and Bengali domestic manuals. Unlike the former, the overwhelming majority of the texts in this genre in the Bengali-language were written by men. (This was not necessarily the case for other indigenous languages; so, as Walsh reminds us, one of the earliest Marathi language domestic manuals was penned by a woman.) The Bengali anomaly, Walsh explains, was the result of the smaller number of educated and literate Bengali women in the first half of the nineteenth century during the heyday of the domestic manual. However, as she also notes, albeit in passing, when a greater number of educated and literate Bengali women emerged later in the century, they were not as attracted to the domestic manual as a genre compared to other genres. This suggests the possibility, at least, that there may be more to the predominantly male authorship of the Bengali manuals than merely the shortage of women writers in Bengal. Might the predominantly male-authored Bengali manuals be indicative of a significant difference between the Euro-

American and Bengali contexts of domesticity? Even the possibility of this line of enquiry is foreclosed, however, when the Bengali manual is too readily assimilated into a global narrative that has both already identified the domestic manual as a women's genre and assumed a certain fixity to gender as the perceived sexual differences between men and women.

Walsh's own material, however, takes us a long way down the road of teasing out the outlines of an alternative logic at work. For example, Walsh usefully draws our attention to the particular ideological work of the Bengali manuals. The latter, according to Walsh, mediate the shift in the locus of authority within the Bengali family, from an extended family where authority was dispersed across several family elders, including women elders, to a dyadic marital unit where familial authority rested less ambiguously on the shoulders of the young husband. The strategies for negotiating this shift in the manuals, as she demonstrates, were as varied as the manuals themselves. Some authors emphasize a companionate model for the relationship between husband and wife; others stress wifely devotion over all other family obligations; and still others, while partaking in the changes, are decidedly conflicted about them or are openly misogynist. What emerges from this discussion, albeit only implicitly, is the importance of the domestic as the site for the construction of a new masculine identity defined in opposition to elders, both men and women, in the family.²¹ One of the many contributions of Walsh's study—fully attentive to the quirky details as well as to the particular ideological burdens of her texts—is to leave no doubt that the Bengali domestic manual, as such, was no mere "derivative" product: it was, neither more nor less than its Euro-American counterpart, part of a global process whose manifestations were undoubtedly uneven in different locations. By the same logic, Walsh's contextual Bengali material also suggests the possibility of pushing her analysis still further: that is, to recognize that a Euro-American conception of gender, understood in the binary terms of man/woman, might not at all be adequate for the ideological work of gender in the Bengali-language domestic manuals.

Consider for a moment how a revised conception of gender—one that in fact takes the Bengali material seriously in a theoretical sense—might raise a very different set of questions about the gender work of the Bengali manuals than the ones arising typically from the Euro-American manuals. What if—as hinted in Walsh's own contextual analysis of the manuals—a

binary relationship between men and women does not structure the politics of gender in the Bengali-language manuals? What too if the domestic manual was not automatically identified with the fashioning, or, indeed, self-fashioning, of women? The Bengali-language manuals, freed from such a priori assumptions, might indicate an alternative possibility: that is, the genre serves precisely in the fashioning of a new masculine gender identity constructed in opposition to family elders.

The ability to recognize an alternative politics of gender at work, to acknowledge variety in the modes of the constitution of masculinity and femininity, rests on a willingness to abandon the binary man-woman structure of gender and all that comes with it. By this logic, moreover, Walsh's difficulty in finding traces of women's agency in the Bengali manuals extends beyond the fact that the manuals were written overwhelmingly by men. Her efforts are further complicated by the binary assumption of gender that accords the primacy of the man-woman opposition as the constitutive condition for the agency of women qua women. The Bengali manuals, with their emphasis on constituting the conjugal unit of husband and wife against the larger extended family, do not yield so easily to a conception of women's agency more suited to Euro-American domestic manuals in which the modern husband-wife dyad has already been naturalized. They suggest, instead, that the traces of a new agency for women qua women might be found paradoxically *within*, and through, the conjugal unit itself: that is, in opposition to extended kinship relationships rather than in any simple opposition to men.

By this same logic, moreover, the most telling aspect of the gender politics of the Bengali manuals might not be a question of women's agency after all. One intriguing aspect of nineteenth-century colonial Indian discourses on domesticity—as distinct, say, from both Euro-American and precolonial discourses on domesticity in the region itself—is the narrowing and progressive identification of the domestic sphere with men and masculinity.²² The domestic, in fact, emerges in the context of colonial Indian conditions as a preferred site for the self-constitution of men qua men. The heavily male-authored Bengali manuals may be indicative of more than just the belatedness of modern education for women in Bengal. In the world of the Bengali domestic manual, Bengali men were being produced *as* men in opposition to finely graded familial hierarchies rather than in a simple binary opposition to women. The alternative foundations for the

gender identities of “men” and “women” in nineteenth-century Bengal, as suggested in the Bengali-language domestic manuals, create an opening for radically rethinking the politics of gender in the region.

The delinking of gender in South Asia from the man-woman binary has been, for a variety of reasons, pioneered by the scholarship on men and masculinities. In the first place the scholarly attention on masculinity as a gender identity in South Asia did not arise in the context of binary sexual difference, but in the context of colonizer-colonized relations. Here Ashis Nandy’s remarkable 1983 book on the psychology of colonialism, despite its reliance on purportedly natural and monolithic conceptions of British versus Indian masculinity, was a pioneering contribution.²³ My own 1995 book on the use, and the reuse, of the idea of the “effeminate Bengali” both by British officials and by Bengali elites was both enabled by, and conceived broadly within, this tradition of the studies of colonialism, even though, at the same time, it was also interested in the various other indigenous vectors of power that crisscrossed colonial categories in the late nineteenth century.²⁴ Since then, the scholarship on masculinity in relation to multiple forms of power, from colonialism to the more contemporary politics of Hindutva in India, has grown exponentially.²⁵ This burgeoning field has put pressure on the commonsense about gender that still informs by default much of the gender scholarship in South Asia.

The field of masculinity studies in South Asia, like elsewhere, has undergone something of a renaissance associated with what R. W. Connell identifies as the “ethnographic moment.”²⁶ The new ethnographically oriented studies have dual implications. On the one hand, they go a long way in demonstrating the sheer diversity of masculinities within South Asia as well as in uncovering a range of different sites—the agricultural field, the workplace, the street, the cinema, literature, to name just a few—for the constitution and performance of different masculinities.²⁷ Moreover, and in keeping with the earlier work in this field, the masculinities that are explored here are shown to be constructed in relation to generation, class, caste, and religious identity rather than to women in any simple way. On the other hand, however, the newer ethnographic turn also comes with some significant silences that limit its usefulness for a theoretical reconsideration of the concept of gender. There is, for example, a certain residual tendency in this scholarship of reproducing an unproblematic relationship between men and masculinity, without addressing the *contingent* mapping

of masculinity onto male bodies in the first place.²⁸ As such, more contextual and better-grounded studies of men and masculinities in the region have been enormously productive for a more robust feminist politics. At its best, however, finely grained ethnographic studies also have theoretical significance.

Take the emergence of the category of MSM, or men who have sex with men. The category itself migrated from the vocabulary of grassroots organizations working in South Asia, like the Naz Foundation International, into the vocabulary of international agencies, MSM was designed to capture the multiplicity of frameworks for sexual behavior that did not fit within the standard framework of sexual orientation or gender identity. In this case, the scrupulous attention to the pattern of sexual behavior on the ground in South Asia produced a conceptual breakthrough: the birth of a new category, MSM, to capture the realities on the ground. By taking theoretical cognizance of gender's myriad "logics of practice," this shift in perspective opens up the category itself to contextual analysis instead of assuming the meaning of gender in advance.

This kind of reorientation of conceptual categories can have enormous implications for feminist politics and it is here that I turn to a fuller discussion of the potentially productive relationship between the kind of global approach to gender that I have been arguing for and its relationship to feminist praxis. Take, for example, the debates over the contemporary challenges to mainstream feminism in India. These debates too often rely on facile comparisons of the crisis of Indian feminism with a superficially similar trajectory undergone by a white Euro-American feminism. My own recent study, informed by an attempt to think against the constraints of a preexisting and monochromatic conception of gender, suggests a very different history of early Indian feminism and, by extension, of its contemporary crisis.²⁹ The interwar period saw the spectacular public emergence of a new politics of women qua women in colonial India. The new gender identity of Indian women, in this case, emerged not in opposition to men but in opposition to the collective identity of communities, defined by religion, caste, ethnicity, and so on, which had formed the typical building block of colonial Indian society. Hitherto the symbolic burden of representing the identity of the respective communities had fallen on the women of the communities; the latter thus jealously guarded the right to control "their" women. Women, self-constituted as such, emerged out of

the stifling embrace of communities in the interwar period to constitute a dramatic new public identity. The far-reaching implications of this development, however, have been hitherto obscured by a conventional binary discourse of gender within which this moment of arrival for early Indian feminism appears as less spectacular and is found to be wanting in comparison with Euro-American feminism. Rather than apprehend the nexus of woman/community as a rich site for the struggles of early Indian feminism, what one sees is simply the lack of a fully formed feminist sensibility according to a Euro-American model based on a conception of gender rooted in the man/woman binary.

Yet in India—unlike in Europe and North America—the gender identity of women, under the transitional conditions of the interwar period, carried an extraordinary political valence. The Indian woman, as the subject of a new feminist politics, became, against the collective community rights of the ex-colonial subject, the paradigmatic figure for the individualized rights of the future Indian citizen. And it was thus that the specifically feminist articulation of women qua women became the prerequisite for the critical transition that took place in India in the 1920s and 1930s: from a cultural to a political nationalism directed toward a nation-state in the making. This particular history of the making of women as a public constituency in colonial India, and the recruitment of this new woman as the paradigmatic subject of rights in the future nation-state of India, however briefly, weighs heavily on the contemporary dilemmas and contradictions that confront feminism in India.

The reliance on a priori understandings of gender has done a certain disservice to appreciating fully the potential and pitfalls of this history of early Indian feminism. Until recently, for example, scholarly accounts of the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, the first piece of social reform legislation in colonial India that was enabled in large part by the efforts of autonomous all-India women's organizations themselves, failed to note its crucial significance: the first, and since then also the only, uniform law on marriage that cut across separate religious personal laws affecting marriage for different religious communities in India to be applicable universally.³⁰ To be sure, the 1929 legislation was a penal and not a civil measure; but it carried enormous symbolic significance as the first uniform law on marriage. The act enabled Indian feminists to put into circulation a different kind of liberalism—an agonistic liberal universalism that was defined both

with, and against, classical European liberalism—to underwrite the revised new political nationalism of late colonial India. The fact that subsequently efforts to substitute separate religious personal laws with a uniform civil code have gained little traction, even in postindependent India, tells us something about both the possibilities and the limitations of the interwar moment in which the politics of Indian feminism came into its own.

By the 1930s, for example, the feminist movement in India was already deeply divided over the terms of women's political representation in the proposed new colonial constitution for India. To be sure, the competing sides in the debate made their arguments in language made familiar by parallel debates among feminists in Europe and North America: that is, they grounded their claims on the competing foundations of women's equality with, and difference from, men. Yet this classical liberal paradox of Euro-American feminists is not what informed feminist debates over women's political representation in India. Indian feminists were caught in a very different paradox that was rooted in their investment in an agonistic liberal universalism: the simultaneous disavowal, and constitution, of collective communal identities in the claims made on behalf of women. The very conditions that had once enabled women, as in the campaign for the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, to constitute themselves as distinct from the collective identities of distinct religious communities, confronted Indian feminists now with impossible choices. The outcome of the constitutional wrangling of the 1930s was the return, willy-nilly, of women as symbols once again of reconstituted group identities. The dilemmas for a contemporary politics of women cannot merely draw on superficial comparisons with the trajectory of feminisms elsewhere; it needs precisely to engage with the particular legacy of early Indian feminism.

Interestingly, both the possibility of a uniform civil code and the question of women's political representation have reemerged as subjects of controversy for Indian feminism today, but their interwar genealogy remains largely misunderstood.³¹ The point is not merely to register continuities, but to understand better the very particular dynamics that have informed the legacy of the gender politics of women in India. The constitutive contradictions of Indian feminism, despite some superficial similarities, have been quite different from those made familiar by a dominant Euro-American feminism.³² While it might be tempting to see the contemporary problem for Indian feminists to accommodate adequately various

kinds of “difference,” within women and within feminism, in terms of the challenges that black or “Third World” feminism has posed for white Euro-American feminism, this would, in effect, be a misdiagnosis. Only by breaking loose from received notions of gender does it become possible to register the peculiarities of early Indian feminism and to reflect on its legacy for contemporary feminist debates in India. By the same token, this same conceptual move also helps to cut through invocations of a routinized conception of gender that have blunted its once radical and subversive edge. Nivedita Menon identifies two distinct trajectories for the term “gender” in the contemporary political landscape in India. On the one hand, the politics of caste and sexuality have widely deployed gender as an analytical category in ways that challenge “women” as the subject of feminist politics. On the other hand, in state developmental discourses, gender is used as a synonym for “women.” The result, as Menon notes, has been both to dissolve and domesticate women as the subject of feminist politics.³³ If gender is to continue to serve a robust feminist politics, then feminists need to start with putting the term itself under interrogation.

The larger point is more than just an insistence on the multiplicity: the innumerable range of particularities that typically mark the manifestations of gender in different places and in different times. Rather, it is to insist that the empirical workings of gender—in all its variety—has a broader theoretical point to make: the need for a radically open conception of gender that decisively exceeds the unacknowledged and surreptitious way in which its use in feminist analysis is still too often reduced or folded back—“in the last instance,” as it were—into a reassuring and familiar binary: the dichotomous understanding of male and female.

To return, then, to the question with which we began: to bring a global perspective to gender means to give theoretical cognizance to the multiple contexts in which it appears. This has potential, to be sure, for democratizing our concepts and analytical categories—like that of gender—in the project of recasting a Eurocentric historiography. But, more important, it has potential for raising a new and different set of questions about a past whose full import for the present has still to be realized. This has implications not only for better feminist scholarship but also, ultimately, for a more potent feminist praxis that is shaped by, and responsive to, the peculiarities of its own histories.

The significance for feminist practice of taking theoretical cognizance

of the local and the empirical is, at least, threefold. It cautions against false analogies between different historical formations. It also serves as a corrective to the hubris of much contemporary politics, which, in sublime ignorance of the past, not only naturalizes the present but limits the possibilities of the future. And, finally, it opens the door for a feminist politics of the future that is not hemmed in by the conceptual constraints of its past, but whose concepts and strategies are flexible enough to respond to changing conditions. My argument is not premised on attributing any special qualities to the areas grouped recently under the label of South Asia. Rather, in my argument “South Asia,” as both a particular and an ambiguous geopolitical entity, serves as a telling reminder that the multiple locations of feminist scholarship and of feminism have both a substantive and a theoretical contribution to make. We elide this at the expense of a feminist politics that requires dense contextual analysis to remain both relevant and critical. Feminism’s future as a radical project may lie precisely in a scrupulous accounting, both contextually and conceptually, of the particular locations of its multiple iterations.

NOTES

1. The reference, of course, is to Joan Wallach Scott’s pioneering essay “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.” For Scott’s own discomfort with the routinized invocations of gender, see her “Some More Reflections on Gender and Politics”; and, more recently, see Scott, “Unanswered Questions,” her response to the “American Historical Review Forum: Revisiting ‘Gender’: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.”

2. For various iterations of my own attempt to think through this question, see Mrinalini Sinha, “Reflections from the Scholarship on India” (round-table panel, “Gendering Trans/National Historiographies: Similarities and Differences in Comparison,” at the Berkshire Women’s History Conference, June 2005); “How to Bring a Global Perspective to Gender?” (paper presented at the American Historical Association annual conference, January 2008); “Beyond Europe: Working with Gender, Masculinity, and Women” (paper presented at the University of North Carolina-Duke workshop series “What Is the Future of Feminist/Gender History,” February 2008); comment, at the conference South Asian Feminisms. Gender, Culture, Politics” (University of Pennsylvania, March 2008); and the Asian Studies Lecture (Northern Arizona University, March 2009). I am grateful to the organizers and to the audience at these events for giving me an opportunity to pursue these questions. My biggest debt, however, is to Srimati Basa, Ania Loomba, and Ritty

Lukose for pushing me to clarify my arguments and for insisting that I stay with this argument even when I was ready to give up in frustration.

3. Strasser and Tinsman, "Engendering World History," 164. Also see Najmabadi, "Beyond the Americas?"; and Boydston, "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis."

4. Najmabadi, "Beyond the Americas?"

5. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

6. I use the term "Third World feminisms" in its politically expansive, but not necessarily homogenizing, sense to include feminisms of women of color within Europe and North America as well as the feminism of women outside these areas; see Mohanty, Torres, and Russo, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, and Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*.

7. See Boydston, "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis."

8. Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women*. Also see Amadiume's *Male Daughters Female Husbands*.

9. Cornwall, *Readings in Gender in Africa*, 13. My attention was drawn to this point by Heike Becker, "Review of Andrea Cornwall, ed., *Readings in Gender in Africa*," *H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews*, April 2006, at <http://h-net.org>. See also Cole, Manuh, and Miescher, *Africa after Gender?*

to. See Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

11. For one example, see Becker, "Let Me Come to Tell You."

12. The reference here, of course, is to Pierre Bourdieu's classic *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

13. For an example of this kind of theorizing—where the empirical details themselves generate the theory that is utilized to make sense of them—in the context of South Asian material, see Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*. My reading of Pollock's theoretical strategy is indebted to Gould, "How Newness Enters the World."

14. See, for example, Riley, "Am I That Name?"

15. Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches* and "Beyond the Americas?"

16. Najmabadi, "Beyond the Americas," 14.

17. Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India*.

18. In this discussion, I am drawing from my review of Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India* and *How to Be the Goddess of Your Own Home, Indian Economic and Social History Review* 44, no. 4 (2007): 547-51.

19. Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India*, 116.

20. *Ibid.*, 2.

21. For hints that domesticity in nineteenth-century colonial India might operate in a different register than its Euro-American counterpart, see Sangari and Vaid, *Recasting Women*; Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*; and Chatterjee, *Unfamiliar Relations*.

22. To be sure, the domestic sphere was an equally important site for the construction of bourgeois masculinity in Britain; see Tosh, *A Man's Place*. But the

making of an autonomous “domestic” sphere became crucial in very different ways for indigenous middle-class claims to masculinity in colonial India; see Chatterjee, “Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Colonized Woman,” “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question,” and *The Nation and Its Fragments*. Also see Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*.

23. Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*.

24. Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*.

25. For some examples, see Chowdhury, *The Frail Hero and Virile History*, Banerjee, *Make Me a Man!*; and Basu and Banerjee, “The Quest for Manhood.”

26. See Connell, “Masculinities and Globalization.”

27. For some examples, see Chopra, Osella, and Osella, *South Asian Masculinities*; and Srivastava, *Sexual Sites, Seminal Attitudes*. For my review of these books, see *Biblio* 10, nos. 1-2 (January-February 2004): 32-33; and *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 43, no. 4 (2006): 528-33.

28. For a discussion of this issue, see Sinha, “Giving Masculinity a History.”

29. I am summarizing the argument from Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*.

30. For some recent, albeit belated, recognition of the 1929 act as a uniform law cutting across communities, see Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*; and Arya, “The Uniform Civil Code.”

31. For the context of this contemporary discussion, see Sunder Rajan, “Women between Community and State”; and Nivedita Menon, “Reservation for Women: Am I That Name?,” June 12, 2009, on the Kafil blog, at <http://kafila.org>.

32. I am tempted here to quote the famous line of the eighteenth-century theologian and philosopher Joseph Butler: “Everything is what it is, and not another thing.”

33. Menon, “Sexuality, Caste, Governmentality.”