


COLONIAL CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: (A)HISTORICAL ORIENTALISATION OF AWADH BEGUMS

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ABSTRACT

Bahu Begum and Malika Kishwar were the begums from the royal house of Awadh. Their lives uncover the intriguing early modern world of Indian women. They lived in an ivory tower. Nevertheless, they embarked on a riveting journey of diverse female roles, complexities and empowerment. The achievements of Bahu Begum and Malika Kishwar offer a dissenting perspective against the colonial notion of a civilising mission and foreground women's empowerment before western feminism. Ahistoricity about early modern Indian gender constructs provided theoretical grounds for such colonialist perceptions. The advent of historical thinking is also a missed opportunity, as the struggles of Bahu Begum and Malika Kishwar are absent in the simultaneous embrace of heroic historicism in the line of Manikarnika, Kittur Rani Chennamma or others. The idea of empowered women during colonial India and women's participation in the Indian freedom struggle still suffers from gender myopia and lacks historical reasoning. Edward Said's critique of Orientalism provokes a comprehensive review of the colonial construction of women's empowerment in India. Hence, the present article analyses the nationalist obsession with Indian women in colonial India, focusing on the history of 'strong' women, 'wise' women, and 'powerful' women in Indian tradition vis-à-vis colonialism-induced women's emancipation through different social reform movements. It also attempts to gauge the orientalisation of Bahu Begum and Malika Kishwar against the British imperialist ventures and dismantle the colonial construction of women empowerment dichotomous rhetoric in early modern India.

Keywords: Awadh Begums, Bahu Begum, Malika Kishwar, Woman Empowerment, 18th Century India, British Imperialism

INTRODUCTION

Eighteenth-century India offers a '*it was the best of times; it was the worst of times*' rhetoric and is still up for debate, as it was marked by the transition from the Mughal state to the establishment of the British colonial state. The disintegration of the Mughal polity, the financial fragility, the chaos, and political unrest in the centre juxtaposed the development of strong regional autonomous entities, economic prosperity, political stability and cultural continuity (Alavi, 2008). As the Mughal imperial system was metamorphosing into British colonialism, erstwhile Mughal polities like Awadh, Hyderabad, Bengal, Mysore, Maratha confederacy, Sikh *misls*, etc., prepared the ground for the most significant historical advances and transformations observed (Wagle & Alam, 1991).

THIS IS A LIMITED PREVIEW OF THE CHAPTER.

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