

## Celebrating the Work of Kumari Jayawardena

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Kumari Jayawardena, *Erasure of the Euro-Asian: Recovering Early Radicalism and Feminism in South Asia*, Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2007, pp. 312.

Neloufer de Mel & Selvy Thiruchandran, eds., *At the Cutting Edge: Essays in Honour of Kumari Jayawardena*, New Delhi: Women Unlimited in association with Kali for Women, pp. 288.

Kumari Jayawardena's work has been critical in pointing to a method of understanding the undercurrents of feminism and democracy in contemporary South Asia. As someone who has been influenced by her work and cherishes the lessons it has taught on historiography and politics in the sub continent, it is a privilege for me to write this review of her latest work and the festschrift edited by Selvy Thiruchandran and Neloufer de Mel. This is my tribute to Kumari.

In her path-breaking work on third world feminism and nationalism, Kumari Jayawardena mapped for the first time the trajectory of third world feminisms tracing their emergence to contexts of struggles against colonization and imperialism, struggles that resulted in projects of nation building. Romila Thapar, through a look at interpretation of the Indian past, underscores the political significance of this attempt to trace the connections between the past and the present, arguing that historical analysis, rather than being driven by intellectual curiosity alone, must attempt to explain the past, as “[s]uch explanations can be crucial to the comprehension of the present,” especially in the present context of struggles over national identities on the subcontinent [Romila Thapar, p.232 & 246]. Much of Jayawardena's work has been animated by “a critical engagement with nationalism and its intimate linkages with gender, class and ethnicity...” [De Mel, p. xvii] and has “uncovered many...interconnections which subverted the dominant values of the British Empire” [Sheila Rowbotham, p. 229].

Mapping the border-crossings and rendering visible the bridges between South Asians and Europeans during colonialism with all its contradictions and resolutions has been an important part of this engagement. The common perception has been that ideas traveled eastwards from the heartlands of the Enlightenment. Rowbotham, speaking to Jayawardena's work that traced a different path for feminism in the Third World, looks at the friendship between Ponnambalam Arunachalam and Edward Carpenter where it was the former that gifted to the latter the intellectual tools with which to critique colonization and imperialism [Sheila Rowbotham, pp. 220-229].

In contexts of mobilization around rights, feminists in South Asia have been acutely sensitive to and critical of processes of tradition making – the “invention” of tradition being critical to the construction of the identity of women, the identity of the nation [Uma Chakravarti p.3] and culture. Interrogating the tendency to read culture in essentialist ways, Jayasuriya stresses, through a cogent review of anthropological writing on culture, the materiality of culture and its kinship with ideology, so that is a site that is variable and constantly negotiated rather than fixed or immutable [Laksiri Jayasuriya, 139-141]. For instance, as Pieris points out in his essay that traces the very different contestations of the

family in the nascent church and in early Christianity in the first four centuries of the Christian era, class and gender were already the sites of tactical alliances and struggle [Aloysius Pieris, pp. 178-79], anticipating in a sense, similar struggles in the modern period several centuries later. “Can feminists destabilize the hegemony of nationalism and Islam?” asks Val Moghadam, extending Kumari’s analysis to the Middle East. “And what are the prospects for a feminist nationalism?” [Moghadam, p. 100].

Contestations over identity, which began during the colonial period depended on the separation of the different races – especially the white from the non-white *and* the conflation of the identity of the nation with the identity of the woman of the dominant non white group that saw itself as the torchbearer of nationalism and anti colonial resistance [upper caste Hindu, bhadramahila, kula kanthawa/kulangana as the case may be]. Malathi de Alwis looks at the emergence and content of “domestic science” in Sri Lanka as an instance of the ways in which the encounter between British colonialism/Protestant Christianity and Sinhala Buddhist nationalism transformed everyday manners of living and sensibilities particularly with respect to the home and domesticity: “The ideal Sinhala Buddhist woman...was one who was decorously dressed, modestly behaved, pious, obedient, chaste and domesticated...[T]he woman’s respectability being established by identifying her as...tied to family or clan.” [Malathi de Alwis, p. 203]

Sangari’s delineation of the notion of multiple patriarchies in contemporary India, helps understand similarity and difference in dialectical fashion within nation states, across them [Sangari p. 60]. Beyond nation states, Nancy Fraser examines, in the European context, the potential of three dimensional feminist politics to create egalitarian societies transnationally, strengthen recognition of cultural multiplicity and maintain inclusive borders [Nancy Fraser pp. 82-83]. In grappling with cultural multiplicity and difference, however, Radhika Coomaraswamy argues that human rights discourse gives us an intellectual apparatus with which local movements can transform cultural practices that violate basic human rights – the maximizing of diversity while protecting women’s human rights offering the only way forward [Radhika Coomaraswamy, pp. 116-122]. Wickramasinghe, using the prism of social research methodology, looks at the tensions between the local and the international within the context of feminism in Sri Lanka and provides an analysis of the multiple resolutions feminists have devised in the course of organizing and working in contemporary Sri Lanka [Maithree Wickramasinghe, pp. 249-272].

Kumari Jayawardena speaks to the intersection between identity formation, patriarchy, race and exclusion prior to the emergence of the nation state, anticipating the exclusions inherent in the interpretations of the present.

Processes of identity formation left out of the reckoning several classes of people who contributed to nation building projects in indispensable ways. The Euro Asians in South Asia, Jayawardena points out were one such group, distant from pure Europeans and pure Asians who constantly challenged ideas of race, legitimacy, frontiers, indeed ideas of the nation itself. (Jayawardena pp. 34) The anxiety surrounding Euro Asians ranged from fears of “sexual contamination, cultural decline and moral breakdown” [Jayawardena. p.5) to their subversive potential as critics of both European colonialism and local orthodoxy [Jayawardena p.9].

The internal boundaries which provided the context for patriarchies under colonialism were not drawn merely between European, Euro Asian and Asian. Class and caste cut through each of these categories to create a very complex hierarchy and social dynamics in these societies. But this mixing was not new in Asia either. Jayawardena begins her account of the erasure of the Euro Asian with the observation that “[a]t the onset of European colonialism, Sri Lanka was already a ‘Hybrid Island’ where for centuries, migrations and invasions from all parts of southern, eastern and western India, with additions also from the Arab, African and Malay world, had mingled to form communities of Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims. In this ethnic mosaic, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam increased the diversity of beliefs and made the island a plural society, but one where differences based on caste and class also existed.” [Jayawardena, p.19]

Euro Asians emerged, Jayawardena argues from a conscious policy on the part of the colonial power in question to encourage a class of settlers who would through marriages with local women create a mixed population that would owe political allegiance to the colonizers. [Jayawardena, p. 23]. The British honed this process of intermingling to perfection by devising a scale of preference based on class and race – on top of the scale where upper class Hindus, aristocratic Muslims or Euro Asians. Rich officials sent their Anglo Indian children to school in Britain leading to their successful absorption into the British upper classes, some like Lord Liverpool who had an Indian grandmother rising high enough to become Prime Minister of Britain from 1812-1827. [Jayawardena, p. 38].

The superimposition of the hierarchies of race through the medium of colonialism onto a clearly stratified society meant the creation of a system of stratification among Euro Asians based on class, legitimacy and ‘stock’ (a code word for class–cum-occupation) drawing in indices of social status and education as well. The offspring of ‘lawful marriages’ were distinct from the offspring of working class ‘companions’ of European Officers, the former asserting that they are offspring of native women who were ‘highborn’ (Jayawardena, pp. 56-58). This class distinction was also evident in the British policy with respect to ‘military orphans’ in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century - the few who were British and legitimate were sent back to England for education; the children of British Army officers from mixed unions were placed in the Upper Military Orphanage; and children of rank and file were placed in the Lower Military Orphanage [Jayawardena p.122].

The contexts of colonization provided fertile ground for the denigration of not just the ‘oriental’ but also and more unsparingly, the demonization of the ‘half-caste’. Euro-Asian writings reflect the dilemma of mixed parentage, Han Suyin posing a most telling query on her return from Europe to China: “Maybe you cannot live *in* China, maybe you are only a Eurasian, a dirty half-caste, as some people say, but you cannot live *without* China for without China you die.” [cf. Jayawardena, pp. 205-6] Or as Hari Kunzru writes, “What is this feeling of not being who you think you are?...If his father was the strange Englishman...then logically he is half-and-half, a blackie-white.” [cf. Jayawardena, p. 206]

The creation and objectification of the Euro-Asian, and its rejection and negation by both the European and the Asian, Jayawardena observes, masked the political radicalism of the Euro-Asian community on the subcontinent. The revolutionary turbulence in late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries particularly in Europe under the influence of the ideologues of the Enlightenment reverberated in the colonies quickly getting transmitted into liberty from

colonial domination equality of black and white and non discriminatory fraternity. Henry Derozio (1809-1831) and his followers in Bengal challenged Hindu orthodoxy, female subordination and the political conservatism of the period, paying a heavy price for it, Derozio denounced by the orthodox as “the *root of all evils* and the cause of public alarm”, a ‘vagabond *firingi*’ (Jayawardena pp.108-109). And yet, “the visitor looks in vain for any memorial to Derozio.” [Thomas Edwards’ biography, cf. Jayawardena p.120]. His Euro Asian origin stood between him and the nationalist intelligentsia that was not mixed. John Ricketts (1791-1835) asserted the importance of a free press in India. [Jayawardena p.123]

By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century local radicals in Sri Lanka were joined in their criticism of the government by British dissidents in Sri Lanka especially Dr. Christopher Elliot, (1809-1859) an Irish doctor and Editor of the *Colombo Observer*. As a journalist and relentless fighter against arbitrary government, he criticized “the rulers as men who, knowing nothing of ‘the native character or circumstances’, had tried to impose direct money taxation ‘upon an unrepresented people’, thereby creating ‘universal discontent’” [Jayawardena p.134]. The *Colombo Observer* regularly transmitted news of the revolutionary movements in Europe to the Sri Lankan people, leading to the accusation by the Governor of fuelling a Chartist type agitation and passive resistance to taxes. [Jayawardena p.139].

Charles Lorenz (1829-1871) critiqued religion and pleaded for more enlightened approach that discouraged inequality and exclusiveness. [Jayawardena p.157-158] A founder of the Ceylon League with five others, Lorenz protested against encroachments made on the constitutional privileges on British subjects, “accusing the British government of being interested only in ‘what they can exact’ from the colonies and asserting the justice would only be obtained ‘by reliance on ourselves’” – even if it meant an agitation by people to defend their rights. [Jayawardena p.161]

Lorenz was among the first to recognize the class divisions of colonial society – his concern for workers’ welfare on plantations and the neglect faced by Artisan communities for instance [Jayawardena 169]. A.E. Buultjens (1865-1916) carried forward Lorenz’s work by organizing skilled workers into a trade union – printers, book binders, compositors and proof readers in printing firms and newspaper offices - and leading a historic strike.

Alongside campaigning against colonization, many Euro-Asians expressed modernist and liberal views of women’s emancipation and liberation, challenging existing patriarchal structures, especially in India and Sri Lanka [Jayawardena, p. 214]. For instance, in 1909, at a meeting of the Ceylon Women’s Union, five Euro-Asian women performed a “Dialogue on Women’s Rights.” [Jayawardena, p. 218]. Making a headstart in education, Burgher and Euro-Asian women’s literacy was higher than that of Sri Lankan men, resulting in the opening out of professions to them – notably teaching. Even the Buddhist ideologue Anagarika Dharmapala was taught in a girls’ school by Dutch Burgher ladies [Jayawardena, pp. 218-20]. Literacy also opened out the fields of creative writing, journalism and medicine to women, leading them to storm bastions of patriarchal privilege and authority.

“[I]n crucial moments in history, dissenters of mixed European and Asian origin pioneered social and political reform, and in later decades were involved in anti-colonial, trade union and feminist movements,” concludes Kumari Jayawardena, our Euro-Asian public intellectual who has shaped consciousness and research on imperialism, associational

freedoms and feminism on the sub-continent specifically, and indeed across the world over three generations.