

BOOK REVIEW

A VIEW FROM THE WEST

Jane Russell

The Gaze of the Coloniser British Views on Local Women in 19th Century Sri Lanka by Elizabeth J. Harris S.S.A. Colombo 1994, 63 pp; Rs. 75.00.

This first publication in the series "Retrieving Women's History" initiated by the Social Scientists' Association marks a departure from earlier studies on Sri Lankan social history. As the Project Coordinator, Kumari Jayawardena notes in the prologue: "The history of Sri Lanka has been documented and analyzed in detail but it remains a very male-oriented history, where women hardly figure, except as wives and mothers".

Elizabeth Harris' booklet - it runs to sixty three pages with a few excellent photographs and a lithograph - takes as its focus the views of Britishers, as set down in the writings of travellers of both sexes, soldiers, civil servants and their wives, teachers, missionaries and theosophists, on the dress, manners, education and status of Sri Lankan women in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Dr. Harris signals her "deconstructive" approach to her subject by the titles she chooses to denote the divisions of her analysis. The introduction is entitled "The Conditioning Context"; it is followed by "Patterns of Imagery", the central text, which she sub-divides into "The Appearance of Sri Lankan Women", "Chastity and the Marriage Bond", "Literacy and Women's Education", "Women and Religion" and "Sri Lankan Women: Respected or Degraded?" before coming to a final "Assessment" on the "General Status of (Sri Lankan) Women".

Possibly the most valuable element of this study is the light thrown on the racial, religious, social and sexual prejudices of 19th century British men and women. In some ways, these insights into the "imperial outlook" of the perceiving British are more striking than those into the perceived subject of the commentaries, Sri Lankan women. To take one aspect highlighted in "Patterns of Imagery", the issue of gender demarcation, she cites four Englishmen who remarked on the lack of distinction between Sri Lankan women and men such that "men are often mistaken for women" (John Ferguson, 1903: cited on p. 15), though not, it should be observed, the other way round. (This is a point which Dr. Harris does not explore further, although she does note that several writers found "Cingalese" women prematurely aged and unattractive). The perceived effeminacy of the Sri Lankan man seems to have had a disturbing effect upon the psyche of the public-school educated Englishmen. For example,

This total absence of the strong line of demarcation that in all other countries marks the individuality of the sexes, is so unnatural that one receives an impression of unconquerable contempt and dislike for the entire race so mingled, and this feeling is never shaken off". (Edward Sullivan (1854) cited on p. 15.)

As for the rural female dress of cloth and jacket, it's lack of feminine charm so irritated journalist William Knighton in the 1840's that he condemned "Singhalese female humanity" for being the most "unbecomingly" dressed in the world. (cited p. 15).

Problems in gender recognition apart (and it should be remembered that Victorian England was a society so prudish about nudity of the lower limbs that even the legs of grand pianos were 'dressed'), the imperial visitor to Sri Lanka was confronted with so much that was alien to his or her narrowly Protestant background that he or she often found it difficult to accommodate even a fraction of the cultural panorama unfolded before them. Where the middle-class immigrant was concerned (and Dr. Harris' source materials is necessarily drawn mainly from this literate and self-conscious segment of British society), their imaginations seem to have been as constricted by rigid social conventions as their bodies were by their tight jackets, breeches, boots and leggings in the case of the men and corsets, bodices, comboys, petticoats and button-boots in the case of women. Although Englishwomen writers' romantic fascination with the 'Dark Other', as Dr. Harris describes it, makes their accounts superficially less racist than those of their male counterparts, their lack of perspective, due to the shielded lives they led, renders their judgements as empty and vain as the Englishmen's are "arrogantly judgmental" (p.19).

Dr. Harris' thumbnail sketches of the different commentators, appended as footnotes, form in themselves a delightful gallery of colonial personalities. However, in regard to one of her characters, Colour Sergeant George Callandine of the 19th Derbyshire Foot, his reference to his Kandyan mistress as "my poor little dingy" deserves amplification. First, as Elizabeth Harris notes, while authors like Captain Robert Percival were declaring that Englishmen would not dream of associating with Sinhalese women (p.13), in reality many Englishmen were merrily producing Anglo-Ceylonese offspring. Although liaisons with Sinhalese women were apparently more frequent among the lower ranks of the army, it was not quite the prerogative of rankers as the author's material has led her to believe (p.16). In the early days of the British occupation of the Kandyan provinces, several officers also took Sinhalese women

as common-law wives - a fact that diarists in the officer class might not have wanted given much publicity. When Sir John D'Oyly died in the 1830's, it was found that he was using his salary to maintain and educate a number of half-Sinhalese sons of dead British officers.

However, in regard to Sergeant Callandine's reference, the author has possibly mistaken the Kandyan pet-name of Dingy (hard 'g'), short for Dingiri Menike, with the English adjective 'dingy' meaning 'dark, narrow and mean'. She castigates Callandine for his unromantic rhetoric and lack of ethnic scruples over what she views as "basic sexual exploitation" (p.13). This seems a little harsh on the hapless Serjeant; from the time of king Rajasinghe II, liaisons with Europeans were actively encouraged by the Kandyan Court. Royal patronage, in the form of gifts of lands, employment and titles, was conferred on Europeans, either captured or inveigled into the Kingdom, who could be persuaded to settle down and raise families. Fairness of skin, whether considered from an aesthetic viewpoint or a caste-based one, was regarded as more beautiful and/or valuable than darker skin. Women like Dingiri Menike, coming presumably from poor homes, in contracting such a liaison might have expected or hoped for some favour either from the British government or the Kandyan nobility, at least for their children, if not for themselves. Whether they would have got it is another matter.

But "poor little Dingy" would have felt George's absence keenly when his Regiment was transferred to India in 1820. Apart from losing access to his pay packet, she would have lost his protection. Perhaps Dr. Harris is right after all - George's lamentation is too prosaic by far.

However, the general tone and value of British discourse on Sri Lankan women improves marvelously with the discussion of the actual structures of the civil law, as it affected women, rather than mere social habit. D'Oyly, Sawers, Sirr and Davy were all educated professionals - Sawers and Sirr had a deep understanding of English common law. Their translations

and commentaries on Sinhalese law show a profound appreciation for the conventions and niceties of a wholly different legal culture. The same can be said of British comments on female literacy and girls' education - for which many commentators were themselves largely responsible. Again, the air of professionalism overcomes any suggestion of racial prejudice. It would seem that British imperialists were more at ease "doing something" rather than in the passive occupation of comparative observation and analysis. The lack of metaphysical speculation in 19th century British education appears to have made its best products more fit for practical action than for imaginative (and possibly unbalancing?) thought.

The picture that emerges of Sri Lankan women through the reports of civil servants and missionary-educationalists contains more penetrative wisdom than the tittle-tattle of early passers-through. And it is from this wealth of informed and eloquent opinion that Elizabeth Harris makes her assessment of the general status of 19th century Sri Lankan women. But she first has to tackle the problem of where to place her benchmark in order to avoid any accusation of bias. After all, the moral standpoint of the feminist Christian is naturally different from that of the Islamic or Buddhist feminist or the feminist Hindu. The attachment of Buddhist and Hindu women to their religion illustrates her difficulty nicely: was it due to genuine piety or was it a reactionary atavism born of illiteracy and social powerlessness? As she says, judgements in such issues are often based on "vocation, class and cultural conditioning" (p.44).

In such ideologically choppy waters, Dr. Harris has to be congratulated for keeping an even keel. Finally she decides that, generally speaking, girl children and women from poor (and caste-oppressed) homes were more discriminated against and exploited than otherwise, and were often subjected to such inordinate physical and mental stress as to cause premature ageing. It is a picture that is not so radically different today, eight decades after the last date of her study.

Dr. Jane Russell, author of *Communal Politics under the Donoughmore Constitution 1931-1947*, lives in Sri Lanka

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