The History of Women's Movements in Asia and the Middle East

Monday 26 October 2020, by JAYAWARDENA Kumari (Date first published: 30 September 2020).

For twenty-five years, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* has been an essential primer on the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century history of women's movements in Asia and the Middle East. Kumari Jayawardena presents feminism as it originated in the Third World, erupting from the specific struggles of women fighting against colonial power, for education or the vote, for safety, and against poverty and inequality.

In this excerpt, from Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World, Kumari Jayawardena outlines the framework for her now classic comparative study of the feminst movement in the Third World. She outlines the causes and conditions for the spread of feminist ideas and movements in Asia and the Middle East, tracing how varying religious beliefs and ideologies, colonial histories, and economic circumstances determined the extent and manner of feminist struggles. She also outlines various external influences, changing ideas of education, and the influence of Western feminist ideas and culture on these movements.

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This study deals with the rise of early feminism and movements for women's participation in political struggles in selected countries of the 'East' in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The developments in the countries chosen—Egypt, Iran, Turkey, India, Sri Lanka, China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia—show certain parallels and similarities of experience as well as some clear differences of strategy based on their specific historical backgrounds, and provide interesting material for comparative study.

The countries dealt with have one factor in common: they have either been directly subjected to aggression and domination by imperialist powers interested in establishing themselves in the region, or indirectly manipulated into serving the interests of imperialism.

The words 'feminism' and 'feminist' have become emotive words that often evoke hostile reactions. Feminism is generally thought of as a recent phenomenon, rooted in Western society, and people tend to overlook the fact that the word was in common usage in Europe and elsewhere in the 19th and early 20th centuries, to signify agitation on issues concerning women. The meaning of the word has now been expanded to mean an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation within the family, at work and in society, and conscious action by women (and men) to change this situation. Feminism, in this definition, goes beyond movements for equality and emancipation which agitate for equal rights and legal reforms to redress the prevailing discrimination against women. While such movements often advance the struggle for equality, they do not tackle such basic issues as women's subordination within the family or challenge the existing framework of men-women relations in which the subordination of women is located. In this study the word 'feminism' is used in

its larger sense, embracing movements for equality within the current system and significant struggles that have attempted to change the system.

The concept of feminism has also been the cause of much confusion in Third World countries. It has variously been alleged by traditionalists, political conservatives and even certain leftists, that feminism is a product of 'decadent' Western capitalism; that it is based on a foreign culture of no relevance to women in the Third World; that it is the ideology of women of the local bourgeoisie; and that it alienates or diverts women, from their culture, religion and family responsibilities on the one hand, and from the revolutionary struggles for national liberation and socialism on the other. In the West, too, there is a Eurocentric view that the movement for women's liberation is not indigenous to Asia or Africa, but has been a purely West European and North American phenomenon, and that where movements for women's emancipation or feminist struggles have arisen in the Third World, they have been merely imitative of Western models.

As a result of this, I have thought it necessary to take up some of these issues and to show that feminism was not imposed on the Third World by the West, but rather that historical circumstances produced important material and ideological changes that affected women, even though the impact of imperialism and Western thought was admittedly among the significant elements in these historical circumstances. Debates on women's rights and education were held in 18th-century China and there were movements for women's social emancipation in early 19th-century India; the other country studies show that feminist struggles originated between 60 and 80 years ago in many countries of Asia. In a way, the fact that such movements for emancipation and feminism flourished in several non-European countries during this period has been 'hidden from history'. Only recently, with the rise of feminist movements all over the world, has attention been directed to early feminists and feminism in the Third World.

The movement towards women's emancipation described and analysed in this book was acted out against a background of nationalist struggles aimed at achieving political independence, asserting a national identity, and modernizing society. During the period dealt with in this study, the countries under consideration were trying to shake off imperialist domination. All had faced the reality of foreign conquest, occupation or aggression. They had resisted in diverse ways, but their resistance had three common facets: first, the desire to carry out internal reforms in order to modernize their societies, it being felt that this was necessary if they were successfully to combat imperialism; second, the dismantling of those pre-capitalist structures, especially ruling dynasties and religious orthodoxies, that stood in the way of needed internal reforms; and third, the assertion of a national identity on the basis of which people could be mobilized against imperialism.

The external and internal forces were thus closely interlinked. The forcible domination or opening-up of the countries to capitalist penetration had created unequal trading relations and promoted the expansion of a local class of merchants, commission agents and collaborators of foreign capitalists. In all the countries under consideration, some sections of the capitalists, primarily those who went into industry and whose products had to face foreign competition, conflicted with imperialism; their dissatisfactions were shared by intellectuals and professionals who had studied abroad or were products of the modern schools and colleges that had been started in the 19th century. This local bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie faced the continuing fact of foreign occupation and economic domination. In some countries, they attempted to throw out the occupiers and to develop on a basis of autonomy; in others, they tried to negotiate more advantageous positions for themselves. In all cases, however, they felt the need to sweep away crumbling ruling groups and monarchies which tended to submit to imperialism (the Qajars in Iran, Manchus in China, the sultanate in Turkey and the Shogun in Japan); this was considered a necessary step towards the modernizing, reforming and strengthening of internal structures which were essential if an effective opposition to imperialism

were to be mounted.

This resistance, which used the paradoxical strategy of adopting Western models in order to combat Western aggression, reinforce cultural identity and strengthen the nation, took various forms. Japan, for example, industrialized rapidly, becoming a powerful country within the framework of a highly authoritarian imperial system and a traditional hierarchy. China, in contrast, swept away the feudal monarchy and challenged Confucian attempts in order to modernize the country, resist imperialism, and build up democratic forces. India, while purifying internal structures of the worst excesses, concentrated on the political struggle and achieved a political, but not a social revolution, and in Sri Lanka the emerging bourgeoisie successfully negotiated a transfer of political power which left the existing social structure unchanged. Turkey and Iran associated 'civilization' with capitalist development and Europeanization, programmes that were carried out by dictatorial regimes which imposed the necessary reforms on the people. Egyptian reformism and nationalism developed within the framework of the prevailing class structures and the monarchical system.

As nationalism grew, the struggle of the local bourgeoisie in most of these countries developed on two fronts simultaneously: internally against the pre-capitalist structures, and externally against imperialism. In this agitation, which took on a bourgeois democratic form, the bourgeoisie had to assert the national cultural identity in the form of patriotic appeals intended to unite and arouse the consciousness of the people, while also promoting reforms aimed at educational, scientific, technological and industrial advancement. The liberal slogans of democratic rights, including representative government, universal suffrage, the rights of man and the rights of nations, which were used in the struggle, thus had a material base in the striving of the local bourgeoisie to gain political and economic power.

The creation and assertion of a cultural identity was itself dialectically related to the growth of imperialism. One of the by-products of imperial aggression was a mutual interaction between the cultures of Europe and of the non-European world. Eighteenth-century Europe experienced a new wave of interest in the 'Orient', which led to voyages of further discovery and colonial conquest, and to an interest in Eastern cultures and social structures. The Orientalists, as the new scholars became known, were particularly active in India after Britain gained its initial foothold in the 1750s and the colonial scholar-officials began to 'discover the East', as well as in France, where Napoleon's 1798 expedition to Egypt was accompanied by a shipload of French scholars who set about studying all aspects of Egyptian society. Similar studies undertaken in other Asian countries helped to uncover much of their history through archaeological and historical research; in the course of time they also led to the creation of a concept that became an instrument of cultural domination—a concept of non-European cultures seen through the prism of European cultural and intellectual development. This is the construct that Edward Said has called 'Orientalism':

The Orient is an integral part of European material civilisation and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles … a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.

The interaction between cultures proved to be a two-way process, however. The beliefs that the older cultures of the East were the 'source of civilization', that the quest for origins lay in the East and that European languages were linked to Sanskrit, were to have a profound influence on Western political thinking in the 19th century. Similarly, in those countries of Asia and Africa which had been exposed to 'Occidentalism', the attempts to emulate Western economic development were associated with an appreciation of Western cultural values and specially of such concepts as natural rights, liberalism and parliamentary democracy, which were perceived as the foundations for such growth.

Within this framework, those nationalists who challenged foreign aggression had to tackle the problem of asserting a national identity by combating obscurantism, and by reforming and rationalizing existing structures and religious and cultural traditions.

It is in the context of the resistance to imperialism and various forms of foreign domination on the one hand, and to feudal monarchies, exploitative local rulers and traditional patriarchal and religious structures on the other, that we should consider the democratic movement for women's rights and the feminist struggles that emerged in Asia. The country studies, in which we examine the situation of each country in detail, will show that struggles for women's emancipation were an essential and integral part of national resistance movements. In all these countries, the 'woman question' forcefully made its appearance during the early 20th century. The debate on the role and status of women had of course started earlier, but in the era of imperialist and capitalist expansion the question assumed new dimensions; the growth of capitalism changed the old social order and gave birth to new classes and new strata whose women had to pose the old question in a new dynamic. In short the issue was one of democratic rights.

To foreign and local capitalists and landowners, women were the cheapest source of labour for plantations, agriculture and industry. To the colonial authorities and missionaries, local women had to be educated to be good (preferably Christian) wives and mothers to the professional and white-collar personnel who were being trained to man the colonial economy. To the male reformers of the local bourgeoisie, women needed to be adequately Westernized and educated in order to enhance the modern and 'civilized' image of their country and of themselves, and to be a good influence on the next generation; the demand grew for 'civilized housewives'.

The importance of female labour under conditions of capitalist development in Asia has to be stressed. While it is true that women had toiled in the fields and plantations and domestic industries in the precapitalist phase, it was with the development of capitalism in a colonial or semi-colonial context, that they were to become available as potentially the largest and cheapest reserve army of labour. Women's labour was therefore very important to local and foreign capitalists; traditions and practices which restricted women's mobility or enforced their seclusion were thus detrimental to capitalism in its search for cheap 'free' labour. With the growth of industries—especially those associated with the textile trade—the demand for women's labour grew in all the countries under consideration: China (silk and allied manufactures), Japan (textiles and consumer goods), Iran (carpets), Egypt (cotton), India (textiles) and Turkey (rugs and textiles). Women's labour was also crucial in the plantation sector (tea, rubber, coconut, sugar, etc.) and in farm and domestic agriculture in these countries. Moves towards the further 'emancipation' of women to enable them to work and to better serve the needs of industrialists, planters and farmers were therefore to be expected.

The process of capitalist expansion also created an emerging bourgeoisie which arose partly from the needs of the imperial administration, i.e. local administrators and professionals, and partly from the needs of the new forms of economic organization that served foreign capital. The men of these emerging groups, however, saw the 'woman question' in a very different light. While the women of the peasantry and working class were being proletarianized, those of the bourgeoisie were trained to accept new social roles in conformity with the emerging bourgeois ideology of the period. For example, the bureaucrats, missionaries and male reformers of the local bourgeoisie were convinced that women had to be emancipated from the social abuses of a 'savage' past, from practices that were defined as repugnant by the prevailing norms of European society. Obvious areas of violence and oppression were highlighted, such as widow burning in India, veiling, polygamy, concubinage and seclusion in Egypt, Turkey, Korea, Vietnam, Iran and Indonesia, and foot-binding in China. But to these were added other so-called 'barbaric practices' that went against the Christian ideas of monogamy and sexual control that Europeans enforced upon their own women.

The nature of the resistance movements in these countries and of the feminist struggles within those movements varied with the balance of forces that resulted from capitalist expansion. In most countries, they were dominated by the local bourgeoisie. Again, there were two types: those in which the bourgeoisie found it necessary to mobilize the masses in the struggle, as in India and Indonesia, and others, in which the local bourgeoisie replaced the imperialist rulers through a process of negotiation and gradual reforms as in Sri Lanka or the Philippines. The women's struggles associated with both types of resistance movements did not move beyond the sphere of limited and selected reforms: equality for women within the legal process, the removal of obviously discriminatory practices, the right to the vote, education and property, and the right of women to enter the professions and politics, etc.

In a few countries, however, the involvement of peasants and workers in the resistance movements pushed the struggle on to a broader front. Not content with replacing the pre-capitalist or imperialist regimes with a local bourgeoisie, they aimed at a more radical transformation of society, at the establishment of a socialist society, a trend that is illustrated by the country studies of China and Vietnam. The feminist element in these movements was able to become a revolutionary force that simultaneously helped to transform society and to improve the position of women. In this context, examples of revolutionary feminism during the early 20th century provide valuable evidence that feminism was not a diversion, a bourgeois aberration, nor a matter to be considered only after a social revolution; on the contrary, it was a process which had to be continuous and permanent during all stages of the struggle.

Women's movements do not occur in a vacuum but correspond to, and to some extent are determined by, the wider social movements of which they form part. The general consciousness of society about itself, its future, its structure and the role of men and women, entails limitations for the women's movement; its goals and its methods of struggle are generally determined by those limits. Mention will be made in the country studies of courageous women who consciously strove to move beyond those limits in the pursuit of goals that today would be defined as feminist, but who failed because of the lower levels of general awareness.

It is appropriate at this stage to discuss women's consciousness as it emerged in the countries under study after the impact of colonialism and the experience of Western society and thought. Of all the religious ideologies discussed, Islam has the longest contact with Europe. From its very beginnings it has fought continuously with Christianity. What challenged Islam in the 19th century, however, was not Christianity but European secularism. As Bernard Lewis says:

A philosophy free from visible Christian connotations and expressed in a society that was rich, strong and rapidly expanding, it seemed to some Muslims to embody the secret of European success and to offer a remedy for the weakness, poverty and retreat of which they were becoming increasingly aware. In the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, European secularism and a series of political, social and economic doctrines inspired by it, exercised a continuing fascination on successive generations of Muslims.

Muslim travellers to Europe who tried to understand this secular society were particularly interested in the position of European women. The fact that women seemed relatively free of the social restrictions of Islamic society, that they were allowed to move about, that they were respected in society and deferred to by men, struck them forcibly. The institution of monogamous marriage and the fact that the family was the basic unit of society were also alien concepts that provoked discussion. Evliya Celebi, an 18th-century Turkish traveller and observer of European society, wrote:

If the emperor encounters a woman in the street … he halts his horse and lets the woman pass. If the emperor is on foot … then he remains standing in a polite posture … takes his hat off … and

shows deference to the woman, and only when she has passed does he continue on his way. This is a most extraordinary spectacle. In this country, and elsewhere in the lands of the infidels, women have the chief say and they are honoured and respected for the sake of Mother Mary.

The freedom displayed by women in their social intercourse with men was commented on by many; witnesses to grand balls were compelled to think that such intimacy also meant sexual liberty. The 18th-century travellers were sometimes so struck by the ostensible freedom of women that they tended to exaggerate:

In France, women are of higher station than men, so that they do what they wish and go where they please; and the greatest lord shows respect and courtesy beyond all limits to the humblest of women. In that country their commands prevail.

These travellers were struck by the openness of a society that permitted some men and women to take part in easy social intercourse; it might be said that they found this so surprising because the Islamic élite at that time was accustomed to seclude its women in the zenana. However, non-Muslims were equally impressed. Yu Kil-Chun of Korea went to the USA at the end of the 19th century as his country's ambassador and published an account of his travels in 1892. One of the things that struck him most was the position and status of women in American society and their employment in various activities and professions outside the home.

Faced with societies that were sufficiently developed and powerful to subjugate them, and with the need to modernize their own societies, many reformers of Asia seized on the apparent freedom of women in Western societies as the key to the advancement of the West, and argued that 'Oriental backwardness' was partly due to women's low status.

Since the status of women in society was the popular barometer of 'civilization', many reformers agitated for social legislation that would improve their situation. This new consciousness demanded an 'enlightened' woman. The new bourgeois man, himself a product of Western education or missionary influence, needed as his partner a 'new woman', educated in the relevant foreign language, dressed in the new styles and attuned to Western ways—a woman who was 'presentable' in colonial society yet whose role was primarily in the home. These women had to show that they were the negation of everything that was considered 'backward' in the old society: that they were no longer secluded, veiled and illiterate, with bound feet and minds, threatened with death on their husband's funeral pyre. The concept and terminology of the 'new woman', so fashionable in Europe in the 19th century, was eagerly adopted by both men and women of the educated class.

Though the terminology was similar, the various regions showed differences in this concept of the 'new woman'. In certain Islamic countries the emphasis was on copying European styles of dress for women including the latest fashions, and discarding the traditional dress. The modernists saw the veil as a mark of women's seclusion and backwardness; Jamal Sudki Azza Khawy who, in Iraq in 1911, advocated doing away with the veil, was imprisoned for sedition (Woodsmall 1936: 69). The act of throwing off the veil, regarded as a symbol of feudalism, was given great significance, and occasions when prominent women appeared unveiled became dramatic moments of defiance of the old order. Some examples include the fearless behaviour of the Babi woman leader of Iran, Qurrat ul Ayn, who fought in battles and caused a scandal in the 1840s by going unveiled; the first unveiled public appearances of Queen Surayya of Afghanistan in the 1920s and the Queen of Iran in 1936; the marriage ceremony of Mustapha Kemal at which his bride, Latife Hanem, was not veiled (1922); and Huda Sharawi's boldness in publicly flinging her veil into the sea (1923).

The most important development in Asian feminism during that period, however, was the emergence of autonomous women's organizations and associations of women linked to political groups which

played an important part in nationalist struggles. In some cases, the women were merely involved in promoting handicrafts made by women (e.g. Sakhi Samiti in Bengal in 1886); in the colonial period, however, even such simple activities had political overtones since local products were encouraged in order to counteract the import of goods from Europe. In Korea in 1898, a women's organization that was linked to the liberal political movement agitated for women's rights, especially for education. In 1905, an organization for women's education and suffrage was formed in the Philippines, significantly called Asociacion Feminista Filipino. The first Turkish women's club, named Red and White (1908), was associated with the politics of the Young Turks movement; the Persian Women's Society (1911), which came into being during a period of heightened political agitation and was linked with those struggles, was in contact with British suffragists; the Japanese women's association, Seito (Blue Stocking, 1911), had a strong feminist bias, while the earliest Egyptian women's group, Mabarat Mohamed Ali (1909), was concerned solely with establishing health clinics for women. In contrast, the first Chinese women's association formed by Jiu Jin and other Chinese women revolutionaries studying in Japan in 1904, was consistently feminist and simultaneously agitated for the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty.

The most striking factor about early nationalist and revolutionary agitation in all these countries is that women of all classes went out into the streets to demonstrate on issues of national concern; for example, in India in the nationalist struggles of 1905, 1909 and 1930; in Iran, in 1906 and 1911, during constitutionalist agitation; in China, from 1907 to 1911, during the democratic revolution; in Egypt, China, Turkey, Iran and Korea, in the 1919 nationalist upsurges after their betrayal by Western powers in the post-World War I treaties; and in Japan, when socialists and anarchists demonstrated in the streets. The Third World in that period produced many pioneering women whose courageous activities have not been adequately recognized but unfortunately remain confined to the footnotes of history. In many cases, their achievements are barely known even in their own countries and their names are seldom commemorated alongside male national heroes.

The development of capitalism in Asia brought the participation of women in the labour force, and women's emancipation struggles were geared towards further acceptance of such participation in all major sectors of the economy. As Shah Reza Khan stated, when promoting measures to bring women out of seclusion, 'one half of the population has not been taken into account … one half of the country's working force has been idle' (Elwell-Sutton 1955: 34; emphasis added). The presence of women wage-workers in the labour forces of the countries under consideration led to their incorporation into trade unions and other associations of workers, and to their participation in strikes and industrial disputes.

The 1918 Rice Riots in Japan were triggered off when women port workers refused to load rice and were joined by other workers; this led to a long struggle and a political crisis. In China in 1922, many thousands of workers in 70 Shanghai silk factories went on strike, calling for increased wages and a ten-hour working day; this was the first important strike by Chinese women workers. In India and Sri Lanka, in the years after World War I women workers were active participants in militant industrial agitation and strikes. To give only one example from the region, the most militant activists of the Ceylon Labour Union which led the strikes in Sri Lanka in the 1920s were women factory workers in Colombo; they used to dress in red, were the most vociferous of the strikers and picketers, and formed a bodyguard for male trade union leaders during demonstrations. In Iran, Egypt and Turkey, women were to join with men in the formation of left-wing political groups and trade unions, in spite of repression and adverse conditions for mobilizing the people.

Finally, this study attempts to examine a period of Asian history from the perspective of women's participation in feminist movements for emancipation and their simultaneous involvement in struggles for national liberation and social change. This has included an evaluation of the contribution and motives of male reformers and political leaders who championed 'women's rights'.

The study is limited in scope, being necessarily confined to countries for which material is available. I must also emphasize that a comprehensive history of the participation of the poverty-stricken masses of women in various forms of agitation in Asia has yet to be attempted. While material is available on movements that involved women of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie of Asia, an intensive search would be necessary to unearth detailed information on the participation of women of the working class and peasantry in class struggles and anti-imperialist agitation. (This is a task which perhaps can be done only by motivated researchers in their own countries.) It will be evident that in each of the country studies, certain specific aspects have been highlighted and discussed at some length in this book, for example, education in Sri Lanka, social reform movements in India, revolutionary struggles in China, and the struggle against religious constraints in Turkey. This has enabled particular aspects to be discussed in greater depth, according to material available.

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