

Representing Women Empowerment and Framing ‘the Other’ in Pandita Ramabai’s Travelogue, *American Encounter*

Anindita Borah

Ph D Research Scholar, Department of English, Gauhati University, Assam, INDIA

Email: borahanindita8@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of the research is to highlight Pandita Ramabai’s travelogue, *American Encounter* as a reflection of women empowerment and analyse the problematics involved in considering the status of the ‘other’. There are certain factors involved in the word representation which have an effect on the reader's perspective of the subject being represented. Women empowerment was considered a farfetched idea during the nineteenth century or when Ramabai was present in India. In spite of the social restrictions imposed upon women during the nineteenth century, woman like Pandita Ramabai mustered the courage to travel abroad and create an awareness of women empowerment in her social mission to America.

Key Words: the ‘other’, women empowerment, travel, representation.

Introduction

Travel or travel writing has been observed as a constantly evolving genre in the present day scholastics. During the nineteenth century, travel or writing about travel was not seen as a particularly empowering activity for women during the colonial era and was primarily associated with men. It was mostly assumed during the nineteenth century that only men were capable of taking risks and engaging in activities like travelling. As such Indian women's travel writing during the nineteenth century was considered as an exclusive activity that women could engage themselves in spite of residing in a patriarchal society. As such travel was considered exclusive in India. Nevertheless, some women mustered the courage to travel and write about their experiences in spite of social constraints. These arbitrary excursions gave us plenty of chances to see the world and understand the numerous situations that were put forth from the viewpoint of a woman. It has been observed in recent years that female travel writing made a promising contribution in the field of women empowerment.

Pandita Ramabai, an Indian social reformer from the nineteenth century, wrote the travelogue, entitled, *American Encounter: The Peoples of the United States(1889)*, which is a narration and an examination of American society through the perspective of British colonialism. Ramabai was both an "insider" and an "outsider" inside the social generation of Maharashtra and the larger international project of Christianization during this time. The years that she lived in England, followed by the years that she lived in the United States, provided her with a more in-depth understanding of how the West and the East interacted with one another during the time of the Empire. In addition to this, the book includes content that has been reprinted from booklets that can be found in the Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission Archives. These resources offer a glimpse into Ramabai's point of view on the lives of these women and the opinions that others have about them.

Pandita Ramabai was born during a time in India when women’s status was so subjugated that they were viewed as little more than slaves and the primary function of them was to remain confined within the four walls of the house. Pandita Ramabai was determined to change this perception. They

were not allowed to go to school or venture out on their own, and the vast majority of Hindu women were wed off as children to men who were several decades older than them. Despite the fact that she was born into a Brahmin family, her father held liberal beliefs. He educated his wife and children, which ran counter to the usual expectations of the time. Her motivation for working towards the betterment of society came from him. She experienced the harsh treatment meted out to women during her travels with her brother. Disgusted by what she saw, she made the decision to take action. She converted to Christianity based on her experiences after the demise of her father and then spent the rest of her life working to free widows and other women from the clutches of poverty. Ramabai moved to England in 1883 with Miss Hurford, a fellow missionary, when she was awarded a position as professor of Sanskrit at Cheltenham Female College. She pursued higher education there, in addition to learning English. After experiencing degeneration of Hinduism in India, Pandita Ramabai decided to embrace Christianity in England. She was invited to Dr. Anandibai Josh's graduation in 1886 by her cousin. She made friends with Dean Bodley of the Women's Medical College there, who urged her to pursue employment in the United States. Pandita Ramabai acquired training in the workplace, studied the American public education system and also delivered lectures as well while she was residing in America. Each traveler's work was influenced by his or her political, social, and religious convictions. The stories from white explorers gave the Eastern region a new framework and the Western and remaining regions a new point of reference. The Eastern region eventually came to be known as the other. Due to the white traveler's focus on the ideas of "Exotic East" majority of these trip memoirs lacked authenticity and had an artificial tone. Because of this, most early Western travelogues painted the East as a show.

Discussion

Pandita Ramabai's travelogue titled, *American Encounter* can be seen as a reflection of the political and socio-economic framework of the United States. The fact that she discussed societal structures, political structures, women's rights, and a variety of other themes makes it impossible for readers to discern whether or not the book was written by a man or a woman. It is a narrative recounting the events that transpired throughout her time spent in the United States. It adopted a pro-reform stance, which is necessary for the improvement and reshaping of India.

During this time, she also wrote a book entitled, *High Caste Hindu Woman*. She started her social mission of establishing networks with powerful people for financial contribution to open a secular school for orphans in India. In response to her frequent requests, a public gathering was called in 1887 in the Channing Hall of the American Unitarian Association Building. Pandita Ramabai's concept was given consideration and implementation by a provincial committee of women after Reverend Charles G. Ames was touched by her creativity and oratory abilities. As a result, a group was established to act as the trustee for any funds that Ramabai could use. In the 1880s, Pandita Ramabai travelled from India to England and on to the United States, where she spent three years immersed in the milieu of social reform movements of the day. This book originally titled *The Peoples of the United States* is Pandita Ramabai's response to and critique of American way of life, including the country's government, economy, education and domestic life. As an account of Western society by an early Indian feminist, Ramabai's *American Encounter* is a major approach that illustrates and scrutinizes the American society of the nineteenth century from the point of view of an Indian woman. Her perception as she gazes the American society is a considerable specification of the socio political status of American women in general with frequent comparison with Indian women during the contemporary period.

The portrayal of "other" is given the utmost importance in the travelogue entitled *American Encounter* written by Pandita Ramabai. There is a power struggle going on in discourses between the

subject and the object, and this conflict is made explicit in a vast variety of words and expressions that we are able to access. If we are to believe Stuart Hall, “[R]epresentation is a process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning” (Hall 1997, p. 61). More evidence reveals that members of a society and civilisation are the ones responsible for bestowing meaning upon things, people, and events. As a consequence of this, the meanings that have been ascribed to certain things are not intrinsically stable; rather, they shift depending on the period of time, the geographical location, and the cultural context. “So one important idea about representation is the acceptance of a degree of *cultural relativism* between one culture and another, a certain lack of equivalence, and hence the need for *translation* as we move from the mindset or conceptual universe of one culture or to another” (Hall 1997, p. 61).

Ramabai left for the United States in 1886 and remained there for the next two years and six months, during which time she lectured, travelled, and solicited donations to support her efforts to improve conditions in India. She took Manorama, her daughter who was five years old at the time, along with her, but because of her nonstop travels, she had to bring her back to England as soon as possible and give her to the (Anglican) Sisters of St. Mary. During her time in the United States, Ramabai was successful in cultivating a network of important and well-connected American contacts who provided her with financial support, organised hundreds of speaking engagements for her, and established the Ramabai Association. Through this network, Ramabai was able to raise over \$20,000 in donations in addition to promises of \$5,000 per year for a period of 10 years in order to fund the establishment of a shelter in India for child widows. (Shah, 1977)

Ramabai's work in the United States focussed primarily on educational and reform-oriented movements. She became aware of the abolitionist campaign before the American Civil War, and upon learning about it, she quickly recognised connections between it and the movement to liberate India's child widows. She was tremendously inspired by the lives of the liberators such as Abraham Lincoln, Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, and Harriet Tubman (whom she saw twice in Auburn, New York). She developed a close relationship with Frances Willard, who was the president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), and Willard appointed Ramabai to the position of vice president of the WCTU in India. Ramabai remarked about the Methodist Episcopal Church General Conference that took place in New York City in 1888, during which women's rights were debated. Ramabai criticised the failure of Methodism to fully open the doors of leadership to women and noted that, with the exception of a few denominations such as the Quakers, Unitarians, "and a progressive branch of the Methodists," Christian churches "do not allow women the liberty to expound the Scriptures in their churches—for no other reason than they are women!" Ramabai criticised the failure of Methodism to fully open the doors of leadership to women. She continued by saying, "Women may be as pure as anyone could wish, they may be intelligent, they may be eloquent and talented, they may be a hundred times better than male preachers, but their one and only flaw is that they are women," and because of this, they are not authorised to preach even if they are called to do so by God. Although they did not completely ordain women at the time, the Free Methodists had a number of female preachers and evangelists. Thus it is possible that Ramabai had the Free Methodists in mind when she referred to "a progressive branch of the Methodists."

Ramabai also noted that the majority of financial support for missions and reform initiatives in the United States comes from individuals with modest incomes and women. The assistance provided by the poor, and particularly by poor women, is greater than that of the affluent. This statement refers to the assistance provided for the spread of the Christian faith.

The chapter “Returning the American Gaze” from Pandita Ramabai’s *American Encounter* debunks the stereotype of American women as superior members of society. Ramabai draws attention to the error that eminent scholar and Englishwoman Harriet Martineau pointed out in her book *Society in America*. She created this book after travelling to America in 1840 and getting to know its people. She said as she recounted the situation of the native women:

“They (the women in this country) receive no higher education at all, moreover, all avenues of acquiring it are blocked for them. The highest reach of their education consists of singing, playing musical instruments, a little reading and writing, and needlework. They enjoy no social or political freedom. Should they suffer the misfortune of widowhood or poverty, they have no recourse but to undertake work like sewing, cooking, domestic service, or similar lowly work; or to marry or remarry against their will. The laws of this country take no cognizance of women’s existence at all. Women are mere prisoners of men, like slaves. There is no exception to this in political matters and in the eyes of the law; only in social life might there be an exception, though a very rare one”. (Ramabai, 167)

Ramabai claims that Harriet Martineau's book had a number of revelations similar to this. Using this quote from Harriet Martineau's "Returning the American Gaze" section, Pandita Ramabai draws attention to the misconception we have about American women.

There has never been a time when we haven't had a bias towards viewing people from the West through a rosy lens. The most pleasant impression that they were able to leave on us was the result of their tendency towards sophistication and powerful global status. Pandita Ramabai admits in one of the chapters of her book *American Encounter* that she did not become aware of the subordinated status of American women until after she had moved to the country. To say that Western women are invariably more powerful than Eastern women is a statement that defies logic. It varies depending on the method of perception that is used. It is possible to portray women from Western countries as being both a victim and a benefit of colonialism, depending on the circumstances and the interaction between the whites and the non-whites.

When British men in the 18th and 19th centuries wanted to break free of the constraints of Victorian society and explore opportunities for social advancement and sexual adventure, they often went to Africa. This was especially true during the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth. European women were not permitted to migrate to the United States of America at this time because they were considered as a potential source of financial hardship and a restriction on the sexual opportunities available to European males in the colonies. Male colonisers often took native women with them when they left the area and used them as concubines, forging sexual connections that would someday be seen as a threat to racial borders. When they weren't around the women they were seeking to colonise, they resorted to this. The imperial government had an increasing interest in white women migrating to the colonies so they might spread European domesticity and social mores to its outlying territories. This is because, over time, class worry over racial degradation has replaced earlier concerns for racial integration. In British society, women had a crucial role in starting families and bearing children. This supported preexisting ethnic and social hierarchies, which remained under male control and failed to acknowledge or value women's roles in the establishment of empires. Women were expected to stay at home and raise the children, while men were expected to explore and find new places. Although white women played a crucial role in elevating the status of whites in the African colonies, maintaining white supremacy necessitated the enforcement of Victorian era gender norms that

limited the freedom of female settlers. White women were crucial to white supremacy, but only if they conformed to Victorian gender roles. White women made significant contributions to the success of the white establishment in the African colonies. Both the colonial authority's power structures and the gender dynamics of preexisting social institutions were altered by the inclusion of these people into the empire. The vast majority of women in the settlements continued their careers as 'integrated wives' and women of the memsahib type in the same domestic sphere as those residing in the metropolis. It was pointed out that white women's lives are just as subordinate to non-white women's lives as a result of patriarchy. It was also pointed out that patriarchy was widely accepted. There was never an exception to this rule; this held true for women of all races and backgrounds.

The term "champion of women's emancipation" was given to Pandita Ramabai because of who she was and what she did for the cause of women's freedom. Even though she didn't have enough money, her family didn't back her. Even though society was against her, Ramabai never gave up on her vision and goal of giving women more power. Pandita Ramabai was a social reformer. What made her different from other reformers was that she herself became a model for the changes she worked to make in society. Her brave action of getting women from all over the western world to work together for Indian women, her marriage to a man from a different caste, and her lack of religion ties all show that she is a secular liberal feminist.

Although Ramabai was full of praise and respect for the status quo of post-American women in comparison to ladies from her home country, the gloomy side of American women during those times is revealed in this book. When one investigates the position of women in the United States during that era with an open mind, one is reminded of the precarious situation in which Indian women lived within their own nation. This is the precise way that Indira Ghose explained in her book "Women Travellers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze" that the colonisers in India are colonised in their own nation. As a result, the aforementioned remark provides evidence that Western women lived independently and safely in India during the time of the colonial regime. It is possible to conceptualise the position and status of white women and Indian women at a variety of different levels of authority. Western women have frequently been presented in the role of helpless victims of power. There have been times in her community when white women have been subjected to conditions that are less favourable than those faced by white men.

Conclusion

Ramabai's *American Encounter* is a glaring representation of women empowerment on the part of Ramabai through the medium of travel. By drawing a comparison with her native people Ramabai narrated a number of incidents to highlight how America gave her the opportunity to grow into a refined persona and work for the upliftment of the people in India in spite of facing a number of social challenges for hailing from a patriarchal nation, India. Ramabai also cited a number of incidents to highlight the problematics involved in the condition of American women during the nineteenth century. She realized that the status of women was subjugated not only in India but universally in the entire world and it was high time she did something to revolutionize and challenge the status of marginalized section of the society. She brings to light a reversal in the concept of the other by stating that the western women in America were the other just like how the orientals were considered as the other by the Western people in India during the nineteenth century. She evolved through Hinduism and internalized the spirituality behind Christianity. Pandita Ramabai's position in India will always be remembered as a glaring example of women empowerment who challenged the social dogmas associated with women in the colonial period. Travel in a sense gave her the platform to open up and create an awareness among

Indian women to rise up and explore the worth of one's existence and thereby establish an identity of one's own.

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