
THE RADICAL RESPONSES OF PANDITA RAMABAI: CHALLENGING THE SPIRIT OF HER TIME THROUGH HER WRITINGS

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ABSTRACT: *Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) wrote extensively from her different positions as a social reformer, an activist, a traveler, a deeply spiritual person, as an institution builder and her compulsions led her to pen thoughts. She wrote about the nature and experience of oppressive patriarchal practices, particularly in the context of widowhood, and other distresses in a woman's life. She was a participant observer who wrote about the women's question with a piercing gaze. In her books *Stri Dharma Niti* (1882) and *The High Caste Hindu Women* (1888), she depicted the darkest side of the life of the Hindu widows most of them mere child in the high caste family and the treatment they receive in the family as well as in the society. The writings of Pandita Ramabai can be classified into two broad arenas: in this category we can put her writing pertaining to her understanding of the questions and issues related to women, and in the second one, her travel writings can be kept which Uma Chakravarti has called 'journeys of the self'.*

KEYWORDS: Pandita Ramabai, Her Ideologies, Works, Radical Response through her writings, challenging the society, Social Reformer.

This research paper is a humble attempt to discover the radical responses of Pandita Ramabai, challenging the spirit of her time through her writings and what she did as a social reformer especially in the field of child widowhood, education, emancipation and social status for the Indian women. Being the radical feminist in both her life and letter, Ramabai fought throughout her life for the rights and upliftment for child widowhood, destitute women, child orphan, and their education. She left her mark in the arena of women issues with her ideologies and work during the time when women education was almost non-existent. Education is power she knew and also that both the shudras and women are denied this power making them helpless and hapless lot a mere scum of the earth.

These were the scenarios under which Ramabai had to struggle to establish the humanity of the Indian widows. At twenty- four Ramabai was a widow herself with a young daughter to support. As an activist and lecturer, she went to Poona, which was known for its social reform. Within the same year of her arrival in the city, Ramabai formed a women's society called Arya Mahila Samaj (Aryan's Women's Society) to promote female education and to discourage child- marriage. She then travelled to several cities within the Bombay Presidency forming branch societies (*Women's Cultural Agency*, 35). Ramabai suffered from a sense of alienation

and isolation from society. In this state of mind She wrote: “I was desperately in need of some religion. The Hindu religion held out no hope for me. The Brahmo religion was not a very definite one..... It could not and did not satisfy me....” (*A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure*. 23-24).

Pandita Ramabai’s own person sorrows gave a sharp edge to her reformer’s zeal, ably combined with the stoicism of a philosopher. *Stree Dharma Niti* (1882) is a book in tune with the times, an attempt to awaken women from their slumber. Ramabai’s efforts at women’s emancipation were scorned by the orthodox Brahmins. She was a widow, who enjoyed visibility and public space, which was totally against the social and cultural norms of the time. Though Ramabai herself was a Brahmin, she was ostracized as she was a widow who had refused to stay within bondage. She was probably one of the first known women in India who gave public narrations called “Puranas”, lectured, and earned a livelihood through her writing. Uma Chakravarti writes about her: “Ramabai’s search for personal fulfillment as well as her struggle to understand, and conceptualize women’s oppression from her own position as a woman is very vastly different from the motivations and the world view of the men around her” (*Rewriting History*, 312).

She decided to build her own skills of writing and tried to seek help from outside. In 1883, she left for England and to meet the expenses of her travel she wrote and published *Stri Dharma Niti* and dedicated it to the memory of her late husband. Though this book was in many ways conforming to the reformist agenda of the time but even this early book shows the independency of her thought. She clearly writes that a woman is more than a wife and daughter and as such she should cultivate her individuality with performing all the roles of a wife and mother. Even in England she showed her independence by taking the job of the teacher of Marathi and was warmly appreciated for that. It was here that she came into direct contact of the missionaries who saw in her a bright prospect for spreading Christianity in this country. She was also very much influenced by the missionary’s works and her own hopeless condition as a Hindu widow, in her own religion, amongst her own people. She was drawn to the service aspect of Christianity where love and compassion for the fallen and sick was in contrast to the punishable and despicable aspect of Hinduism

“I had never heard or seen anything of the kind done for this class (fallen women) of women by the Hindus in my country...The Hindu Shastras do not deal kindly with these women. The law of the Hindu commands that the king shall cause fallen women to be eaten by dogs in the outskirts of the town. They are considered the greatest sinners and not worthy of compassion” (*Testimony*, 26).

The most sustained concern in Ramabai’s writing was clearly focused on women. Her first book *Stri Dharma Niti* (1882) disappoints many feminists searching for a radical stance in all

her works. But what we find is a clear development of her understanding the women's questions and critiquing her position in Indian society. The *Stri Dharma Niti* is clearly a product of the 19th century construction of the English speaking middle class who were obviously working in the avenues like the beaurocracy, judicial and legal services, teaching and journalism. The book is undoubtedly stamped with the marks of the new patriarchal codes of 'schooling' women to enable them to better administer the conjugal household. Thus, "*The Stri Dharma Niti*" (1882) is an outcome of the construction of a family relationship and the marks of the new patriarchal codes of "schooling" women to become better and dutiful wives. She wants women to understand "their essence" and work to improve their own condition. She emphasizes here the importance of education in the cultivation of personality.

The fact that the book was picked up by the educational authorities suggests that the work conformed to the ideologies of a class dominating public culture, and the educational policies catering to that class. As the book unfolds, the ideologies of reform so prevalent in the second half of the 19th century on the women's question are unmistakable to any reader. These are clearly new forms of the traditional *Stri-Dharma* propagated from the time of the Shashtra writers to turn *women into pliable agents* (italics mine). But even in this book one can find traces of her own unique understanding of women's issues. In the preface to the first edition of the book she laments the lack of a work through which women could understand themselves and improve their conditions. It is because of that she came to write this book. As Morrison explains in an interview with Jane Bakerman, "I want here, to talk about how painful consequences are of distortion, of love that is not expressed". It is this absence of self-love and self-worth which separates Morrison's characters from their traditions. Francis Beal another very potent Black feminist voice says that, "It is the depth of degradation to be socially manipulated, physically raped and used to undermine your own household -and to be powerless to reverse this syndrome" (*Double Jeopardy...*, 340). The same do we find in the writings of Pandita Ramabai when she says that there is no hope for women in India, whether they be under Hindu rule or British rule (*High Caste Hindu Woman*, Critical quest, 37).

Stri-Dharma Niti (1882) starts with a dedication to 'my countrywomen with love': the dedication also states that the 'small' book was written in the memory of her very 'dear late husband' by the grieving widow of Babu Bipin Bihari Das Medhavi. This sets the stage for the focus on women as part of a conjugal duo, the home created by the duo, and the importance of a consciously parented and managed home. In this, the book is not very different from the manuals for *Stri Shiksha* – women's education- the stories about bad women and good women in Hindi Literature, and the *Behesthi Zevar*, written by Maulana Ashraf Thanavi, given to all brides to Muslim household (c.f. *Pandita Ramabai, Once More*, 21).

But what runs as a thread through the work is the emphasis that Ramabai places on the importance of education in the cultivation of a personality- one can see the beginnings of the educationist already- and the relationship between education and morality. Education is the key

to true knowledge and would lead to self-reliance and the development of an individual. Women must strive to come out of the darkness of ignorance. Pandita Ramabai unlike the male reformers was taking an insider's position and speaking and writing from her own experiences in life (c.f., Shobha P. Shinde, *The Social Reform Movement...*, 203). Beyond the importance of education, which in her view will lead to independence, the heart of the *Stri Dharma Niti* (1882) is the code of conduct for women to ensure harmony in conjugality and marriage, and the moral training of children, all of which are conscious acts that are contingent upon a cultivated wife and mother (c.f. *Pandita Ramabai, Once More*, 21-22). In this book Ramabai positions herself as a staunch opponent of child marriage. Though some of the male reformers also were against it what makes Ramabai stand apart is *her advocacy of marriage by choice on the part of both partners (Italics mine)*.

Her public speech and suggestion to women were horrible for the orthodox men and women and her Arya Mahila Sabha was considered to be an institution set up to do away with the dominion of men. Despite her public appearance and location she found herself to be alone in search and fulfillment of her dream wish that is to set up a widow's home. But this was not shared by even the reformers of the time and very soon she became disenchanted and disillusioned by her own 'countrymen'. *Although Ramabai was observing Indian culture as an Indian, she was also British, Christian and a feminist (italics mine)*. In her book, the values that she had for Indian women were clearly demonstrated by the descriptions of the social conditions for Indian women. She also included a critical reading of the sacred text of the Hindu faith, the code of Manu. While women were allowed to read Sanskrit poems, any text that was associated with sacred rites or ceremonies was strictly forbidden to women (*High Caste Hindu Woman*, Philadelphia, 8).

The limitations of the remarriage agenda may be understood by looking at what Pandita Ramabai wrote about *niyoga*, the practice by which a widow cohabited with her dead husband's brother to raise offspring for him. In discussing *niyoga* Ramabai brings in a remarkable perspective which is completely missing from all the discussions on the 'Vedic Age'. This was the clarity about *niyoga* which was not to be confused with the general principle recognizing the widow's right to remarry. Ramabai described the specific function of *niyoga* which was to provide offspring to the dead husband because dying without male offspring was the greatest tragedy that could befall a man for it would deny him immortality (*The High Caste Hindu Woman*, 70-72). The ancient past was not so golden after all. A survey of the textual prescriptions for men and women gave Ramabai an opportunity to dramatically highlight the double standard of morality contained in them. She arranged her material from *Manu* to show how a widow was too fast, emaciate her body, refraining from even mentioning the name of another man, but the widower was to complete the funeral rituals for his dead wife and then marry once more (*The High Caste Hindu Woman*, 72-73).

Therefore, Ramabai's use of the sacred text was not only unorthodox, but also a glaring example of her independence from the traditional customs. Although Ramabai was herself a high-caste Hindu woman, her personal experiences deviated quite far from the life cycle she described in her book. While recounting the typical high-caste women's lifecycle, her ideals for Indian womanhood were apparent in her critique of traditions and social practices. (c.f., Evans, Joy. *Women's Cultural Agency in British India*, 42). While the sacred law divided a woman's life into three parts: "Childhood, Youth or married life, and Widowhood or old age," Ramabai saw a woman's life as a cycle of dependence upon men (father, husband, and son). (*High Caste Hindu Woman*, 11) She pointed out: "although the code of Manu contains a single passage in which it is written 'A daughter is equal to a son,' the context expressly declares that equality to be founded upon the results attainable through her son" (c.f., *High Caste Hindu Woman*, 12). Having a son was security in the afterlife, as well as in old age. Thus, the scripture established a male-preference in society because a man without a male offspring could not enter into heaven. Through her writings, publishing pamphlets, and lectures she strongly denounced the oppression of women legitimized by these ancient sacred scriptures totally based on patriarchal norms and told the people what should be accomplished so that women would be able to have more freedom and lead a respectable life.

In 1886, when she was in America, she was caught in the various controversies and issues over women's right to vote. She referred to the Seneca Falls address and the declarations to protect women's rights. Ramabai writes in detail about the hysterical male reactions and abusive epithets like "immoral", "heretical", "evil", against the American women activists at that time. In spite of such severe condemnation by the males in the population, the American women rallied around and stood firm in their struggle. She personally attended such national campaigns in America where the 19th century was claimed to be unique because of "women's discovery of herself". She saw this as a collective effort on the part of women to better their own lot (c.f., Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History*, 398).

She saw an open door for her work and she wrote a book about her travels in America and published in translation as *Pandita Ramabai's American Encounter* (1889). It contains a pointed comparison of the status of women in the America and India, and strongly suggests that India should follow down the path of reform. This book gained her a wide circle of American supporters. Ramabai wrote another English book for which she is most widely remembered, *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1888). Published privately in Philadelphia in 1887, partly through the efforts of Ramabai's chief American sponsor, Dr. Rachel Bodley, Dean of the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania, *The High Caste Hindu Woman* seeks to explain to her American audience more completely than she could in any single lecture to motives for her mission on behalf of Hindu widows. While in America, Ramabai raised money for a school she planned to found upon returning to India.

The High Caste Hindu Woman (1888) published in America was a fundraising effort to start her project of educating the women in India. Dedicated to her mother, “the light and guide of my life,” the content of the book was intended to eradicate misconceptions about Hindu women and explain their true needs. Ramabai believed “by the Divine Spirit, that revelation will stir the hearts of those who read the story to deeds of rescue and relief. In the book’s introduction, the Dean of the Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania, Rachel L. Bodley A.M., M.D., made a clearly Christian appeal to the women of America. She began the introduction with a dramatic statement;

“The silence of a thousand years has been broken, and the reader....catches the first utterances of the unfamiliar voice. Throbbing with woe, they are revealed in the following pages to intelligent, educated, happy American women. God grant that these women, who He has blessed above all women on earth, may not flippantly turn away---not to read it (*The High Caste Hindu Woman*) through attentively to the last word of the agonizing appeal is to invoke upon oneself the divine displeasure of ‘him that had none to help them’ (c.f., *High Caste Hindu Woman*, 1).

Letters and correspondence, and *Condition of Life in the United States and Travels There*, 1889 clearly come under the purview of travel writing. Her travels in America opened up a whole range of issues like slavery, women’s organization, the temperance movement, educational system and Churches. Ramabai wanted her daughter to lead her country women out of the slavery of ignorance which will ultimately free them from the cruel practices of religion and patriarchy. One of her letters to her daughter Manorama is very relevant as it accounts the barbaric practice of slavery in America. She has given a long account of slavery personified in the life and work of Harriet Tubman whom she met twice. She has detailed the practices of the institutions of slavery, that how slaves were bought and sold like animals and had no rights and why it was ‘right’ to run away from such cruelty. Pandita Ramabai’s account of Harriet’s running away includes the dangers of doing so, of how she was hounded and hunted by masters and how she crossed the border into Canada where she could be safe. Ramabai describes strategies used by Harriet and others to plan their escape. As the slaves could not read and letters that were read to them were vetted by the masters the slaves used to sing hymns which evoked the condition of slavery and made plans for meeting without being suspected. After her own escape Harriet had helped more than three hundred runaway slaves into Canada. After the abolishment of slavery Harriet legally went back to America and continues to work with orphans and old people. It was during this phase that Ramabai met her. Obviously there was a point to the telling of this story to Manorama which Ramabai reveals to the concluding homily in the letter:

You know, my dear child, there are thousands of little children like you and women like me in our dear India who are as badly treated as the slaves of olden times. I hope my child will remember the story of

Herriet and try to be as helpful to her own dear countrymen as Herriet was and is to her own people (*Letters and Correspondence*, 206-208).

Ramabai was apparently the first public figure from India to solicit funds from the west for setting up social institutions back home. A few years later Swami Vivekananda, too, would do the same, using a very different strategy and for a very different agenda. Ramabai appealed to the American women as women, to help the oppressed widows in India. It was to publicize their miserable state that Ramabai wrote her best-known work *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1888). The book was widely sold; proceed from its sales helped to repay the Wantage sisters for their support in England (this would and end her obligation to them) and to set up a fund for the opening of a Widow's home in India. It resulted in the formation of the American Ramabai Association to provide funds for the opening and continued maintenance of the Widow's Home in India. When she finally set sail for India from San Francisco in 1888 she had completed the initial task of raising funds, but was clearly nervous about the road ahead which, she wrote, 'she made dark, unknown, and so difficult' that she felt almost as if she were going back to a strange people. It was not without reason because her actions continued to be independent and defiant, plunging her repeatedly into controversy (*The High Caste Hindu Woman*, xxi-xxiv, *Letters and Correspondence*, 212-14, 184).

Being a widely travelled person in the very beginning of her life Ramabai had seen the heart-rending conditions of women, especially the young high-caste widows. And after her own widowhood at the tender age of 23, she made it her mission to show them a new way of life through education. She had had her own experience of "the sense of social isolation (which) was further compounded by the absence of religious moorings. Her peculiar location as a woman without any close kin in a world of male reformers 'intellectually' engaged in transforming Brahmanical Hinduism without addressing central questions, all well established in professions and surrounded...by docile and loving women, needs to be borne in mind. Ramabai's search for personal fulfillment as well as her struggle to understand, and conceptualize women's oppression from her own position as a woman were vastly different from the motivations and worldview of the men around" (C.f. *Pandita Ramabai a Life & a Time* 10).

Ramabai was the first feminist who raised her voice against the inhuman treatment of Hindu widows belonging to the upper caste of the Indian society. In her books *Stri Dharma Niti* (1882) and *The High Caste Hindu Women* (1888), she depicted the darkest side of the life of the Hindu widows most of them mere child in the high caste family and the treatment they receive in the family as well as in the society. She wrote, "The widow must wear a single coarse garment in white, or brown. She must eat only one meal during the twenty four hours of a day. She must never take part in family feasts and jubilees with others. She must not show herself to people on auspicious occasions. A man or woman thinks it unlucky to behold a widow's face before seeing any other object in the morning. A man will postpone his journey if his path happens to

be crossed by a widow at the time of his departure. A widow is called an “inauspicious” thing (*The High Caste Hindu Woman*, Isha Books, 108).”

The analytical frame that Pandita Ramabai used in her discussion may be partly ascribed to the kind of text she was creating, which was aimed at a wide audience of primarily non-Indians whose help she hoped to enlist for her work in setting up a widow’s home. She did restrict herself to the oppression of widows but tried to show how widowhood, for the upper castes especially, was to be seen as part of an integral whole rather than an aberration in an otherwise acceptable structure. Her writing on widowhood in *The High Caste Hindu Woman* is marked by two features: first it is almost self-consciously not drawn from her own experiences as a widow of whom we never get a glimpse; and second, her understanding of widowhood is located in her understanding of the upper-caste woman’s status in society. She divided her book into chapters on childhood, married life and widowhood corresponding to the stages in a woman’s life, telling us in her ‘prefatory remarks’ that such a division corresponded to the way the ‘Sacred Laws divided a woman’s life. Further she draws upon an understanding of historical knowledge which nineteenth century men had access to through books, newspaper articles and spoken word (c.f. *Rewriting History*, 282).

CONCLUSION

The modern day thoughts and planning to improve the conditions of women though are similar in spirit to the 19th century the means are different as the odds faced by women in modern society is different. Women in 21st century are subjected to domestic violence, dowry deaths, growing incidences of rapes, molestations, acid attack etc. Movements for the betterment of the condition of women are taken up by society and government as a whole rather than by any particular person. But still patriarchy and male chauvinism exists in the society which makes their condition no better than the 19th century and the question about their status can be said to be derived from the 19th century. Whether it is film industry, sports or private sectors women are paid less for the same amount of work. Hence one can realize the truth that when it is so very difficult to be a woman and exist at her own cost even in the 21st century what would be her plight in the 19th century. Now, I have come to the conclusion that it is our duty to take the matter into serious consideration, and to put forth our best endeavors to hasten the glad day for India’s women.

Thus, Pandita Ramabai was writing, speaking and travelling across the globe in order to communicate her understanding of the oppression of Hindu women as well as a need for the change. She did all these things only for the betterment and respectful life of Indian women. She gave the radical responses to the contemporary society through her writings and carved out a niche for herself and walked on a path where no Hindu woman had dared to travel, defying her society, her religion and most of all the patriarchy.

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