

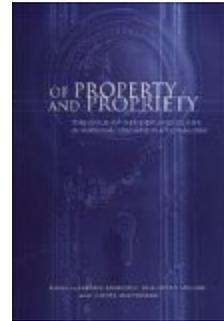
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Himani Bannerji, Shahrazad Mojab, Judy Whitehead, eds. *Of Property and Propriety: The Role of Gender and Class in Imperialism and Nationalism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. xii + 244 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 08-0204380-1; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8020-8192-6.

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Of Legs and Land Grants

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This eclectic volume, edited by a sociologist, an anthropologist, and an education faculty member, aims to add “legs” to the study of colonialism and post-colonialism. The chapters in *Of Property and Propriety* historicize the struggle between feminism, “the woman question,” imperialism, and nationalism in a number of contexts, uncovering and highlighting the multitude of voices through which struggles against patriarchal states—both colonial and indigenous—have been articulated. The book thus gives alternatives to a tendency in colonial and post-colonial studies to view male and female nationalists’ response to colonial discourse about women and the nation as monolithic, and as arising simply in reaction to colonial rule.

Indeed, the introduction to *Of Property and Propriety*, by editors Himani Bannerji, Shahrazad Mojab, and Judith Whitehead, suggests that the collective’s major critique of post-colonial studies lies in its reliance on linguistic opposition and, concomitantly, the largely symbolic analyses produced through binary-linguistic approaches. Thus the case studies included in the book situate struggles against states—both colonial and indigenous—historically, in such contexts as nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland, Kurdistan, and Finland, and eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century India. The result is a volume of case studies that illustrates how the unequal economic, social, and gender relations

within colonized societies resulted in an array of nationalist and feminist narratives. The text also offers an enormously useful comparison of the interactions between white Europeans and the non-white peoples they colonized to the intra-national struggles of Europeans themselves. Historical analysis of land ownership, inheritance, marriage, divorce, reproductive rights, morals, propriety, and literature illustrate that the construction of nationalism in the countries under study has never been a straightforward struggle of “us versus them”: the real strength of this volume lies in its concrete illustrations of how historically multifaceted and contested the national “self” has been.

The volume’s opening essay, “Pygmalion Nation: Towards a Critique of Subaltern Studies and the ‘Resolution of the Women’s Question’ ” by Himani Bannerji, is less an historical account of colonialism than a critique of colonial studies theory. In particular, Bannerji takes on the theoretical products of the Subaltern school and, within it, Partha Chatterjee, whose work on India under colonial rule did much to initiate a generation of inquiries into nationalism and the various forms of “the woman question” that it produced. Bannerji’s essential point of contention with Chatterjee lies in what she sees as his failure to draw clear distinctions between the ways in which colonialists and indigenous nationalists viewed moral propriety and “the woman question.” Bannerji’s agenda is certainly in keeping with the book’s greater project. But, because the chapter does not conclude with any real intimations

about the historical "legs" promised in the book's introduction, or how to get to them, it reads as a kind of war between two theories, hers and Chatarjee's. While it does much to dehistoricize the "woman question," it offers few suggestions for how to historicize it. Such a critique of the chapter notwithstanding, it does provide an excellent overview of the historiography of colonial and post-colonial studies, and would serve as an excellent introductory read for graduate students or others new to the field.

The promised "legs" are delivered in the subsequent chapters. Multiple strains of nationalism, the different sexes who articulated them, the various languages in which they were expressed, and the multiplicity of venues in which they found their audience are taken up in Dana Hearne's "Contesting Positions in Nationalist Ideologies in pre-Independence Ireland" and Shrazad Mojab's "Conflicting Loyalties: Nationalism and Gender Relations in Kurdistan." Both authors are careful not to conflate nationalist and feminist movements into monolithic bodies; rather, they carefully illustrate the various strains in both movements, explicating their cooperative and competing agendas. Hearne's chapter provides an excellent overview of modern Irish history, its feminist and workers' movements, and concludes that a multiplicity of nationalisms were sidelined and silenced by the triumph of conservative, Catholic, patriarchal state nationalism there after World War I. Hearne also illustrates the legacy of activism, stating that while feminist and workers' challenges to the nationalism of the church, the South, and the clan were not successful, they did provide a "potentially transformative" vision of national liberation (p. 86).

Likewise, Mojab explains that Kurdish nationalism (Kurdityati) must be seen as a conglomeration of movements, contested and manipulated by the various states—Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi, and Soviet—into which Kurdistan has been absorbed. She illustrates the extent to which Kurdish women, their manners and morals, became the property of the longed-for Kurdish state in the newspapers and journals in which Kurdish identity was articulated in the early decades of the twentieth century. Mojab's piece also offers evidence of how states use women's behavior to categorize Kurdish-ness in places like Iran, where the role of women is often used to distinguish between tribal and urban, democratic and feudal.

Judith Whitehead's "Measuring Women's Value: Continuity and Change in the Regulation of Prostitution in Madras Presidency" carefully teases apart the role of

the British from that of local Brahmins in regulating the practices of devadasis, or temple dancers. Indeed, Whitehead claims that the criminalization of devadasis must be seen as an intersection of Victorian and Brahmanical morals (both dictated that women's sexuality was only proper within the context of a conjugal family), and changes in patrilocal inheritance practices. In the nineteenth century, many devadasis, who were matrilineal and non-monogamous, were awarded land grants that could be inherited by daughters. These practices worked against British notions of property and propriety, and flew in the face of growing pressure on land in South India, the increased impoverishment of rural families, and the resulting need to appropriate women's property. Common to both discourses was the idea that women's sexuality, as well as their property, belonged to the community, and could be measured to make claims about the community's failures or successes.

Similarly, in "Wifehood, Widowhood, and Adultery: Female Sexuality, Surveillance and the State in Eighteenth-Century Maharashtra," Uma Chakravarti draws attention to "the state and other social institutions" in the pre-colonial period in order to illustrate the extent to which women's behavior was used to shape community values prior to the advent of the British colonial state and the spread of Christian missionary activity (p. 223). Chakravarti's chapter traces the rise of a "Brahmanya-raj" under the Peshwas in the Poona Deccan region, claiming that Brahmana power—as expressed through a monopoly on rituals, and an expansion of land and administrative control—allowed the Peshwai to expand state power. The burden of the "Brahmanya-raj" often fell on women, as upper-caste behavior was often indicated by women's morals and sexuality. The state took pains to create and uphold laws about upper-caste women's dowries, the legitimacy of wives, widowhood, the age of marriage and re-marriage, the tonsure of widows, and the imprisonment and enslavement of those who did not conform. The regulation of women's behavior thus empowered the state, and made the boundaries between castes more rigid, privileging the brahmanya and legitimizing their claims to the highest ritual and administrative positions.

Finally, Kaarina Kailo offers a post-colonial reading of Finnish history in her "Gender and Ethnic Overlap/p in the Finnish Kalevala." She argues that in the Kalevala (a collection of Finnish folktales), compiled during the nineteenth century, women and the Sami (or Lapp) peoples of northern Finland have been "othered" in order to create Finnish national ideals. To create neat national and cul-

tural boundaries between Russia and Scandinavia, “the Finns, the former ‘subalterns,’ incorporated the strategies of other nations to raise their self-esteem” (p. 188). In the Kalevala, the Finns cast the Sami as primitive and amoral to justify taking their land, and women as a currency of exchange between men to create a national, masculine identity. The result, according to Kailo’s reading of the text, has been the creation of “static fictions about national character, male and female spheres and qualities, and the nature of all others.... It creates the essentialist woman, native and other” (pp. 210-211).

The strength of the volume lies not so much in its

topic—the role of gender and class in imperialism and nationalism—but rather in the problematizing of imperialism and nationalism that results from the collection’s case studies. The analyses of texts, laws, administrative systems, unions, educational systems, inheritance practices, and penal practices—to name just a few—contained within do much to ground the study of relations between colonizer and colonized, and to complicate the relationship between the two. The methodologies employed by each of the authors, and the conclusions they reach, provide an excellent read, as well as models for further inquiries.

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