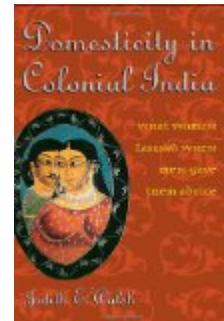


Judith Walsh. *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004. vii + 235 pp. \$96.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-2936-6; \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-2937-3.

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A Literature of Their Own?

Domesticity in Colonial India tells the story of India's confrontation with a new colonial modernity that comes to be contested within the most intimate of everyday spaces: the home. Using a rich body of advice manuals published mainly in Bengal for women during the late-nineteenth century, Walsh attempts to place domesticity as a cultural practice within its broader historical context. The book draws upon a growing literature of post-colonial scholarship made popular by scholars such as Antoinette Burton that engages with the intersection between "colony" and "metropole." [1] Walsh sees within British colonialism an opportunity for Indian women to create their own brand of domesticity in the face of the prescriptive dictates of tradition and the colonial order. As she puts it, "I am more interested in hybridity than hegemony" (p. 2).

The subtitle provides an organizing framework for the book: "what did women learn in late-nineteenth century India when men gave them advice?" Seven thematic chapters and an epilogue set out to answer this question through the close reading of advice literature published for women. Chapter 1, "Global Domesticity," places these manuals in historical perspective by offering a comparative framework that includes examining the similar rhetoric of domestic advice given to women in Great Britain, the United States and India. Walsh claims, perhaps casting her ideological net too broadly based on the geographical reach of her sources, that a "globalization of domestic discourse" emerges starting in the second half of the nineteenth century (p. 16). Al-

though the chapter draws some important comparisons between Western and Indian domestic rhetoric in order to reveal how a culturally constructed rhetoric of domesticity becomes naturalized, I wonder if these examples when taken on their own indicate a truly "global" phenomenon.

Subsequent chapters work to build the main argument of the book through a thematic treatment of what Indian advice literature taught women. In chapter 3, Walsh interestingly complicates what Partha Chatterjee has called the "new patriarchy" by positing that in the domestic realm women contested rather than simply accepted this emergent ideology. [2] Domestic advice manuals offered a new social order that transformed the relationship between the sexes by displacing the old authority of the extended family as represented by elder Indian "aunties" with a romantic partnership model that privileged the authority of the young husband. Walsh convincingly argues in subsequent chapters that the earlier model based on the extended family did not simply fade away. Rather, as she demonstrates in chapter 7, through her close reading of the manual *Woman's Dharma* published in 1900, the lines between the old and new patriarchy were much more fluid. I wonder, however, if Walsh overemphasizes the degree to which women had the freedom to choose between "old" and "new" models of patriarchy. Even members of the Bengali middle class, who are at the center of Walsh's study, had to face strong traditional and legislative dictates that policed male and female relationships. A brief discussion of major social

reform legislation passed during this period would have helped to illuminate another important way in which colonialism reconfigured Indian domestic relationships during the nineteenth century.

This ability to contest the “new patriarchy” for Walsh remains an important legacy of domestic advice manuals even after all of these books go out of print by the early twentieth century. Regardless of their prescriptive nature, Walsh claims that advice manuals provided a space for women to freely create a new kind of hybrid domestic culture. As appealing as it is to see colonialism as a series of exchanges, I do have concerns that the claim about the very real hegemonic effects of colonialism that Walsh makes in the first sentence of her book gets lost in an interpretation that favors exchange over dominance. As she claims, “In the nineteenth century, the dominance of British power in India imposed an alien culture on the indigenous lifeways of that region” (p. 1).

Increased literacy for Walsh is another important outcome of the rise of domestic manuals for women. This is an interesting argument as women’s education in India, by Walsh’s own account, though slowly improving during the early twentieth century, remained quite limited (p. 22). The claim that she “begin(s) with Bengal” but extends her “study of changing patriarchy, home, and family life to all of British India” must be considered in light of how much the influence of these manuals carried beyond urban centers and a very small middle-class elite (p. 3). In addition, little evidence is given of women who ac-

tually read these manuals or what they thought of them. Certainly these kinds of responses are very difficult to glean from the historical record though such a perspective would seem crucial given the main question around which Walsh organizes her text. The book does offer some wonderful examples of men tutoring their wives in the lessons of these manuals. Given the strong presence of men in the reform movement during this period one wonders if men might have been the true intended audience for these works.

Scholars of domesticity and colonial India will find much of interest in this book beyond Walsh’s engagement with the issues outlined above. For example, the appendices excerpt key Bengali advice manuals including *Conversations with the Wife*, *The Duties of Women*, and *Woman’s Dharma*. The bibliography provides an extensive list of advice manuals and secondary sources on domesticity that should prove invaluable for future researchers. As this book reveals, understanding how the ideas that governed everyday life affected society and culture will help further our knowledge of domestic ideology as a culturally organizing principle that pervaded during the nineteenth century and beyond.

Notes

[1]. Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

[2]. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

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