

Christianity, reform and the reconstitution of gender: the case of Pandita Mary Ramabai

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The socio-religious reform movements of nineteenth century India were predominantly located on the site of gender. For the reform movements of the period, the ameliorative and/or civilizing reform of women and the practices that constituted their being, was premised on the unquestioned and unquestionable given of marriage. The structuring of the 'women's question', through 'interested' interpretative normalizations or abnormalizations of sati, child marriage, age of consent and child widowhood, assumed the normativity and inevitability of marriage². It also homogenised the multiple customary laws that regulated and organized the nexus of conjugality and property, for women of different castes, geographical locations and classes, under the textual authority of the 'shashthras'. The customs that bound a small minority of upper caste women were extrapolated to all women who inhabited the imagined space of the Indian nation, very often with deleterious effect on the vast section of women who were not bound by these customs:

It was in the latter half of the nineteenth century that women began intervening into this debate through their writings and through forging new practices of the feminine. Though this intervention had to confine itself within the parameters set by the male reformist debates, in order to be legible and legitimate, it did undermine some of the assumptions that under girded the debate on the 'women's question', as it had been articulated by men of the age.

One of the most disruptive interventions into this debate was that of Pandita Ramabai, a social reformer and Christian convert of the latter half of the nineteenth century. As an articulation of female selfhood, her life and writings instantiate a radical shift from the legislative and cultural constitution of the reformed woman in the nineteenth century. My paper attempts to study the ways in which Ramabai's creative *reformation* of her adopted Christianity allowed for enabling constitutions of femininity and the setting up of a community of women.

Key words: Colonialism, Gender, Reform, Christianity, Women's question

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