

Harmony Siganporia, *I am the Widow: An Intellectual Biography of Behramji Malabari*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan Pvt. Ltd, 2018, xxi + 280 pp. (hardback). ISBN: 978-93-5287-390-6.

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In the 19th century women's issues were raised by men like Behramji Malabar who gave a loud voice to women's concerns and had them addressed by the British government by raising popular consciousness. The book is a critical analysis of the life and works of Behramji Merwanji Malabari (1853–1912)—a Parsi social reformer, journalist, poet, ethnographer, anthropologist and travel writer. The study is mainly based on his three biographies, two written before he was 40 years old and a third 3 years after his death. He then almost vanished from the pages of Parsi and Indian history and this fourth biography in the words of author is an attempt to discover why it happened. The presentation is divided into five chapters and each chapter subdivided into few sections, starting from his early life evolving as a poet and a journalist, then established as a reformer and ethnographer and third is his engagement with women's question.

Who is Behramji Malabari? He is one of the India's earliest as well as most vociferous articulators and supporters of the women's question—from the beginning of the women's movement in Western India in mid to late 19th century. Malabari was born to Bhikhibai and Dhanjibhai Mehta in the princely state of Baroda in 1853. He was not yet 2 years old when his mother was forced to leave her marital home due to domestic persecution and returned to her native place in Surat. The journey from Baroda to Surat in a cart was long and arduous one. Even at native place she was never happy and finally she remarried. Her first husband died by the time Malabari was 6 years old and her new husband Merwanji Nanabhai Malabari was 50 years old who owned a drugs shop and was an importer of sandalwood, sugar, scents and spices from Malabar coast and his surname Malabari. Malabari owes a great deal of influence of his mother—a resourceful, compassionate, self-sacrificing woman who died at the age of 33 years. At the age of 15, Malabari left Surat for Bombay to take his matriculation examination where he pursued his higher studies and alongside being extraordinary in English language got a school job and took private tuition for survival. He got married at the age of 21 and led a happy married life with children. He critically exhausts the Gujarati home lives of Vohra/Bora Muslims, Marwari and Parsi communities—their marriage practices, religion (Parsi reforms), caste and gender.

This is the time when his poetic skills emerge and he explores the politics of language (was also charged with sedition).

The most significant chapter is on women's question, which begins with detailed nuances of Rukhmabai's case onwards to his struggle through his writings in newspapers, journals against the infant and child marriage and enforced widowhood in India which turns him into a reformer. Malabari calls infant marriage as matrimonial slavery and brings out the glaring gender inequalities existing at that time. A Hindu man could get married at any time between 10 and 60 years but if a Hindu girl remained unmarried till post puberty her parents would be excommunicated. Marriage of an infant girl with an old man is the most noxious as the chances are much more that the girl will become a child widow, and she knows nothing. Another exploitative form of marriage between an older girl and a younger boy was arranged by father or a widower elder brother of the boy. Yet another illustration quoted is of a marriage of a foetus (presuming a girl not yet born) with a boy or man. If this man dies she is born widow. Malabari tried to convince that such marriages can only lead to impoverishment of the body, intellect, happiness and vitality in addition to poverty and dependence, and such marriages were rampant in Hindu society where 60–80 per cent girls married prematurely a natural corollary of such marriages is enforced widowhood.

Malabari locates the site of his conflict as the contested negotiations between state and working of caste strictures. First, state saved the girls from flames by putting a ban on Sati (1829) and then the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856, which remained a dead letter. He calls it obvious injustices of patriarchy and oppressive regimes which sought to control and regulate womanhood in 19th century. Widow remarriage over the next three decades were too few to make difference on large scale public opinion. Although the scriptures seem to mandate widowhood only for brahmins, but it was also enforced on kshatriya, vaishyas and shudras. The crusade of Malabari for female emancipation simultaneously asks the English women (powerful factor at home) and women of India (Surat widows) making their appeal (via the widow that is, Malabari, of course) to the women of England. All these efforts led to Age of Consent Bill in 1891 where the age of consummation of marriage for Hindu girls was raised from 10 to 12 years (at least giving them breathing space). Malabari suggests many ways and means to the state and incentives to parents to keep their daughters in school, create opportunities for higher education and professional training for young widows—the aim with which his own *Seva Sadan* was established in 1908.

Malabari's writings also depict sociological nuances when he contrasts on life as seen at home and also in public affairs between India and England. Life in an English home is a life of equality among all members, with marriages founded on the basis of equality as they formed on love and trust. This is also why 'the parent is as slow to assert authority as the child is to abuse freedom' and the same sense of equality prevails in schools and colleges between masters and pupils, further suggesting that it is this principle which inspires a 'sense of independence rooted in a sense of discipline'. He even comments that Indian students studying abroad are ill-prepared by early training at home for equality and disciplined independence.

This text reveals a society in transition in terms of religion, caste, gender and politics in the late 19th century, therefore a rare and valuable asset to scholars of women, history, culture and literary studies.

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