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A Comparative South Asian Feminist Perspective**

by

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Hannah Arendt, Education, and Liberation: A Comparative South Asian Feminist Perspective

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Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.²

This article focuses on Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), education, and liberation, from a comparative South Asian feminist perspective. I am examining Arendt's work as an independent-minded political theorist and philosopher who believed passionately both in education and liberation. She herself said, in an interview with Gunter Gaus in 1964, 'I do not belong to the circle of philosophers. My profession, if one can even speak of it at all, is political theory.'³

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² Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1968/ 1993), p. 196.

³ Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 1.

Exploring Arendt's combination of existentialism and politically radical liberalism, my paper analyses some of the ways in which Arendt and two South Asian women thinker-activists have created models of human action and socio-political liberation, with a special interest in the sphere of education. I am arguing that Arendt's view of politics as phenomenological (grounded in categories that are experiential) and existential has great usefulness and richness for analysing the work of women who were agents in the world of human 'action', a category that Arendt valued so much, and that she distinguished from 'work' and 'labour' in *The Human Condition*. Equally, Arendt grappled with the rich, eclectic resources of classic political thought, from Plato to Locke to Marx and Luxemburg. Reading Arendt non-hagiographically, I analyse her as an independent-minded, wide-ranging, and generative thinker on questions of power, politics, and the realm of human action.

There has been a shift in recent years in academia from analyzing the 'Women's Question in Arendt', to the more fruitful one of 'the Arendt Question in Feminism'. Despite the fact that Arendt herself did not view gender as an overtly political category, we are now engaged in analysis of the rich, complex resources that Arendt's thought offers to feminist scholars. My perspective is that of a feminist from South Asia and the Third World, which is at the same time cosmopolitan. Why does one read Arendt today if one is a non-white feminist? There are many reasons. Arendt's political perspective, which was simultaneously phenomenological or experiential, and prescriptive or normative, offers us a way of thinking which is fecund and pluralist. Arendt was a philosopher of liberty, an activist, and also a Jewish woman: today I place her in dialogue with two South Asian women who were themselves writers, educators, and activists, and who fought for women's emancipation, and also that of other marginalised social groups, such as Dalits or lower-caste people. These women are Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) and Rokeya Hossain (1880-1932), who struggled to define themselves as writers, educators, and civic, social activists during the colonial and early post-colonial period, a period when the twin forces of colonialism and a revivalist Indian patriarchy sought to mute their voices.

'Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it',⁴ said Arendt, in an essay on the Danish woman writer Karen Blixen, better known by her *nom de plume* Isak Dinesen. The epigraph to the chapter titled 'Action' in Arendt's *The Human Condition* comes from Dinesen: 'All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.'⁵ Arendt's ability to use narrative to explore human and female agency is another reason for my interest in her. In particular, I shall be looking in this paper at *The Life of Rahel Varnhagen*, an early and neglected narrative work of Arendt's (a polished version of her Habilitation thesis, written in the 1930s), to understand key issues around gender, Jewishness, narrative, and key categories such as the parvenu and the pariah. This paper, indeed, discusses Hannah Arendt's models of education, action, and liberation as being constitutively narrative and pluralist in nature: my research shares this concept and belief of Arendt's that webs of storytelling constitute and construct the world, even in the domain of action. Actions, in a very meaningful sense of the term, are expressive and narrative in nature: this article pays particular attention to the ways in which women in particular as agents of social change have extended, disseminated, constituted, and reconstituted their action in spheres such as education by writing and narrative writing in particular. Arendt's most

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harvest Books, 1968/ 1970), p. 105.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), p. 155.

individual characteristic is perhaps her passionate commitment to webs of storytelling and narrative, and the ability to create strong conceptual arguments around such narrative. In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt quoted⁶ from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene 2, to show how one collects and culls meaning out of a past that is in fragments.

*Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.*⁷

Arendt even believed that highly significant political categories and events appeared as phenomena to be apprehended in narrative forms, such as the parable. She wrote, for example, 'This history of revolutions--from the summer of 1776 in Philadelphia and the summer of 1789 in Paris to the autumn of 1956 in Budapest--which politically spells out the innermost story of the modern age, could be told in parable form as the tale of an age-old treasure which, under the most varied circumstances, appears abruptly, unexpectedly, and disappears again, under different mysterious conditions.'⁸ We shall later in this article analyse the political parables of the South Asian writer Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, which argue for a renovation of South Asian society, and call for freedom, through education, from colonialism and patriarchy.

If the narrative mode is one area where Arendt is a generative thinker for issues of gender and women's agency, a more difficult area is a whole set of distinctions she posited around the *oikos* and the *agora*,⁹ the private and the public,¹⁰ the social and the political.¹¹ Firstly, one criticizes Arendt for viewing, empirically and normatively, the *oikos*, the world of the household/ private, as completely excluded from the world of the *agora*, the domain of the political as well as of action, the latter two being the highest, privileged categories in Arendt. In propagating this distinction between *oikos* and *agora*, Arendt propagated the gender and class exclusion inherent in classical Greek polity, where women and slaves, the non-citizens in the *oikos*, were excluded from the sphere of the public and the political. On the contrary, feminist scholars argue that gender as a category bridges the two categories, and creates a new category of politics, such as the kinds practiced by Ramabai, Rokeya, or Clara Zetkin and Mary Wollstonecraft.

Arendt's refusal to see that gender is a category of politics ties in with her summary wish to subtract the *oikos* from the world of politics altogether: it is part of her larger project to subtract the world of biology and labour from politics and action—or rather,

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), p. 212.

⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), p. 41.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 5.

⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp 26-34.

¹⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 23-68.

¹¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 35-45.

to see the two former as lower categories than the latter. All these categorical inadequacies are part of a larger taxonomic inadequacy in Arendt. Seyla Benhabib has categorized Arendt's taxonomies as 'phenomenological essentialism,' and has acutely argued that Arendt tends to 'conflate conceptual distinctions with social processes, ontological analyses with institutional and historical descriptions.'¹² Arendt endeavours to capture social and political processes or phenomena, but then freezes them in ways that seem greatly inadequate when further unpacked. She has a habit of creating triads: the principal ones are work-labour-action, private-social-political, and thinking-willing-judging. In all of these, the highest category is the political, the realm of action and of judging. And yet her distinctions blur and dissolve if one uses her own work and empirical examples. In many respects, Arendt's notion of the political is very close to our sense of associative, social, civic movements of a political nature—in which prominent examples would be Eastern European politico-civic movements, such as that led by Waclav Havel in Czechoslovakia, and many environmental and feminist movements. Arendt herself supported many of the 1960s socio-political civil disobedience movements in the USA around the time of the Vietnam War. Politics, whether as a normative or experiential category, is not for Arendt only and primarily about the state. Politics is in her hands perhaps most famously about pariahs, the non-citizens of the globe who have been ejected from the body politic, stripped of the right to have rights. Politics is about banal bureaucrats who commit evil deeds—most famously Eichmann in the Third Reich—and become perpetrators of the genocide of millions of Jews.

In every sense of the term, Arendt is extending the domain of the political to bring in social, associational, and civic questions—and yet her categories seem to be too rigid to accommodate this extension. Arendt's narrow, condemnatory demarcation of the social in *The Human Condition* is followed by the argument that in her times, the social sphere 'excludes the possibility of action...Society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behaviour, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to *normalize* its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement.'¹³

How, then, to rescue Arendt from her inadequate, rigid categories? The answer lies in the realization that one does not read Arendt for taxonomic consistency or even for a logical, spare, precise architecture of categorical distinctions. Instead, one reads her for her restlessness, her sparks of originality, and her innovative extension of discussions of socio-political action. This article, then, reads Arendt not as a Classic but as a Romantic, seeing and valuing in her process, innovation, dynamism, affect, and open-ended pluralism, and not primarily product, demarcation, stasis, ratiocination, and taxonomy.

The word Romantic, indeed, occurs in a key text for understanding Arendt, gender, and political action: that work is *Rahel Varnhagen: Lebensgeschichte einer deutschen Jüdin aus der Romantik*, or *Rahel Varnhagen: the Life of a Jewish Woman from the Romantic Age*. This was written between 1929 and 1933. It was published only in 1958, first in an English translation (by Richard and Clara Winston),¹⁴ and then in

¹² Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), p. 124.

¹³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 37-38.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston, ed. Liliane Weissberg (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1958/ 2000).

1959 in its German original.¹⁵ The aim was to capture the life of a woman at the heart of the Berlin salons of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

*Most representative of these salons, and the genuinely mixed society they brought together in Germany, was that of Rahel Varnhagen. Her original, unspoiled, and unconventional intelligence, combined with an absorbing interest in people and a truly passionate nature, made her the most brilliant and interesting of these Jewish women. The modest but famous soirees in Rahel's "garret" brought together "enlightened" aristocrats, middle-class intellectuals, and actors—that is, all those who, like the Jews, did not belong to respectable society. Thus Rahel's salon, by definition, was established on the fringe of society, and did not share any of its conventions and prejudices.*¹⁶

This is how Arendt showed her admiration of Rahel in volume I of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Rahel Levin (1771-1833) was born and died in Berlin. She became intimate with Dorothea and Henriette, the daughters of the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. Her home became the meeting-place of men like Schlegel, Schelling, Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, Motte Fouqué, Ludwig Tieck, Jean Paul, and Friedrich Gentz. During a visit to Carlsbad in 1795 she was introduced to Goethe. After the death of her father in 1806 she lived successively in Paris, Frankfurt am Main, Hamburg, Prague, and Dresden. In 1814 she married, in Berlin, her biographer Karl August Varnhagen von Ense, after converting to Christianity. At the time of their marriage, her husband, who had fought in the Austrian army against the French, belonged to the Prussian diplomatic corps, and their house at Vienna became the meeting-place of the Prussian delegates to the Congress of Vienna.

In *Rahel Varnhagen*, Arendt described Rahel's inner life, the flickerings of her consciousness, her friendships and love-affairs. There was an intermingling of the private and the public spheres in the salons: a 'conversational public sphere' was created, which Lawrence Klein has analysed as a site with strong female participation for eighteenth-century England.¹⁷ Dorothea, Rahel, and Henriette belonged to a category that became very important for Arendt: the 'exception Jews', the 'parvenu', a figure Arendt criticizes. Instead, she would posit and valorize the figure of the pariah, the outsider Jew, and in her book she argues for Rahel's transition in her consciousness from parvenu to pariah. While the penultimate chapter of the *Life of Rahel Varnhagen* is titled 'Between Pariah and Parvenu,'¹⁸ the final chapter is titled 'One does not Escape Jewishness.'¹⁹ Arendt castigates Rahel's gentile husband for having censored his wife's letters for publication, especially his censorship of Jewish names and correspondents. At the end of Arendt's biography, as Rahel, the cultivated 'exception Jew' and woman, the parvenu, is now made to acknowledge that she is a Jewish outsider, a pariah, the autobiographical projection from Rahel to Hannah is

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: Lebensgeschichte einer deutschen Jüdin aus der Romantik* (Munich: Piper, 1959).

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovitch, 1951), p. 59.

¹⁷ Lawrence Klein, 'Gender, Conversation and the Public Sphere in Early Eighteenth-Century England,' in Judith Still and Michael Worton, eds., *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 100-115.

¹⁸ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, pp. 237-249.

¹⁹ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, pp. 250-258.

resoundingly obvious. After having written the *Life*, Arendt, the parvenu now turned pariah, leaves Nazi Germany in 1933, and becomes a refugee and exile.

Arendt wrote another piercing little piece called ‘Berliner Salon’ on Rahel in 1932.²⁰ Here, she makes the point that Rahel could only be herself for a brief period between the French Revolution and 1806. After 1806, when Napoleonic wars broke out, political repression reappeared, and Rahel, though alive, could no longer express her freedom. But between 1789 and 1806, the salons did accommodate, as we saw, marginal groups such as Jews and women. Self-education, Arendt argues, was a key value in these salons, dominated by the bourgeoisie. ‘The veneration and esteem of women that is documented in this salon is the result of taking private life seriously, a realm that appears more congenial to woman by nature than man—and that was revealed to the public in almost shameless fashion in Schlegel’s *Lucinde*;²¹ here, ‘private life...acquired a public, objective quality.’²² Arendt also argues that denizens of the salons acquired a sense of ‘that personal historicity that makes one’s own life, the data of which can be recorded, into a sequence of objective events.’²³ Here, I would argue, lie the roots of Arendt’s own valorization of exemplary lives and life-writing as bearers of personal historicities (manifested most movingly in her collection of pen-portraits *Men in Dark Times*, 1968) that attain the status of the objective. Arendt’s narrative biography of a German-Jewish woman of the Romantic Age is thus critical to understanding her political thought.

Self-education was seen as critical to Rahel’s individuation in Arendt’s biography of her. Elsewhere in her writing, Arendt was a sharp analyst of the intermingling of spheres in formal education. Her essay ‘Reflections on Little Rock’ saw her making controversial remarks on schooling and the politics of desegregation in America. In this essay, she correctly argued that schooling brought together the familial-private, the social, and the political spheres. She criticized Black parents who were sending their children to forcedly desegregated schools, because by this they were forcing children to enter the domain of the political, denying them their legitimate pre-political phase in life. She also criticized the federal government in the USA for in a sense forcing southern states to desegregate schools. Arendt came out sounding arch-conservative to many. Yet Arendt herself never had any doubts that she was on the side of the Blacks: ‘I should like to make it clear that as a Jew I take my sympathy for the cause of the Negroes as for all oppressed and underprivileged peoples for granted.’²⁴ Ralph Ellison made a moving critique of Arendt, saying she had completely failed to understand the sacrifice that black parents were making in thus sending their vulnerable children into newly desegregated schools to face danger, even to their lives.²⁵ But Arendt’s point that politics should be a domain for people between the ages of eighteen and eighty²⁶ still deserves to be taken seriously as a caveat. Rokeya Hossain, whose work I analyse later in this paper, combined nitty-gritty administration and leadership in the domain of

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co, 1994), pp. 50-65.

²¹ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, pp. 60-61.

²² Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, p. 61.

²³ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, p. 61.

²⁴ Hannah Arendt, ‘Reflections on Little Rock,’ *Dissent* (Vol. 6 No. 1, 1959), 45-56: p.46.

²⁵ Interview with Ralph Ellison, in *Who Speaks for the Negro*, ed. Robert Penn Warren (New York: Random House, 1965), pp. 342-344.

²⁶ Elisabeth Young Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 317.

school education with writing on political, social and gender issues: yet she too knew that to nurture students in school required creative, careful pedagogy, and not ideological indoctrination—this is one of the reasons her school was so successful and popular.

In her essay ‘The Crisis of Education’ in *Between Past and Future*, Arendt stated that ‘the problem of education in the modern world lies in the fact that by its very nature it cannot forego either authority or tradition, and yet must proceed in a world that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition.’²⁷ Paradoxically, *because* education offers the promise of natality, of something new being born, Arendt favoured that students be given both authority and a sense of the past in their education, especially school: the new elements that they would create would be born after they, having assimilated the past, would then decide which way they wanted to go. (It is striking that the South Asian and Bengali poet-educator Rabindranath Tagore crafted his experimental school and university at Shantiniketan in West Bengal in a spirit that has resonances with Arendt: he believed that to nurture creativity in students, a sense of the past was vital. At least one component of Shantiniketan’s highly pluralist philosophy was a renovated Vedic ideal of pedagogy and contemplation.) Educationally indoctrinating students in progressive ideas, argued Arendt, would be to deny the students the freedom to choose the new. Once the adult student went to university, s/he could enter the sphere of the political as an adult: Arendt showed great sympathy along with some criticism for the university students’ rebellions and movements which shook the US and France in the 1960s, movements led by young people such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the son of old friends of Arendt. Even if Arendt distanced herself when student movements grew too strident, she believed in the universities’ role as guarantors of truth against tyrannical forces.

Behind Arendt’s criticism of such measures as enforced desegregation to further racial equality was an implicit fear that such measures would only produce ‘exception Blacks’, like ‘Exception Jews’, and ‘Exception Women’. The last category deserves more comment. When she was invited to give the Christian Gauss Seminars in Criticism in 1953 at Princeton University, much pleasure was expressed by the university in having a woman lecturer. At this point Arendt wrote to her friend Kurt Blumenfeld, ‘At the closing ceremony, and ever so slightly tipsy, I enlightened these dignified gentlemen about what an exception Jew is, and tried to make clear to them that I necessarily found myself here an exception woman.’²⁸ We are back to Rahel Varnhagen again, as well as to the categories of parvenu and pariah: Arendt believed passionately that identities of marginality like Jewishness should not be badges of complacency or routes to socially enforced, conformist upward mobility.

Arendt wrote more about Exception Women, and indeed women in general, in a review of Alice Rühle-Gerstel’s *Das Frauenproblem der Gegenwart, The Contemporary Women’s Problem*, published in *Die Gesellschaft* in 1932.²⁹ Arendt wrote an on the whole sympathetic review of the book. She herself did not support a women’s movement or women’s politics. Yet she makes insightful points in this essay. She states that the professional woman is an economic fact beside which the women’s movement marches, and agrees with Rühle-Gerstel who sees professional women

²⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 195.

²⁸ Quoted in Young Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, p. 272.

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, ‘On the Emancipation of Women,’ in Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, pp. 66-68.

being underpaid compared to their male peers, and as suffering a double burden of housework and professional work. Rühle-Gerstel had advocated that women, since they were propertyless employees of their husbands, should identify themselves with the proletariat. Arendt pointed out that when considering women, it was not sufficient analytically to see them as individuals; one had to take into account the fact that they were placed in the domain of the family—a different domain to that of the workplace, and one with which women had a deeply intimate relationship. Women could be enslaved in the family, or they could dissolve the family: though Arendt does not really follow up this point, the argument remains compelling even today, since the family, the primary site of gender dynamics and oppression, is a domain that women have close, often highly affective links with.

Arendt argues that the women's movement has never united to achieve concrete goals, except in the realm of humanitarian and charitable work.³⁰ Research that scholars such as myself are engaged in³¹ on women's action and gendered social capital in the realm of charitable work shows that such female agency is in fact at the interface of the social and political, that such action is an important part of the public sphere, and that such work, an extension of the domain of care traditionally ascribed to women has historically offered important advances in social security and human development. While this may not have been true in Arendt's lifetime, it is also certainly true today that globally there is an intricate and influential structure of organizations and associations of many hues, working on issues of gender, which also function at the interface of the private, the social, and the political; these act as powerful lobbies and pressure groups. There is a politics of women's non-governmental organizations, of international feminist aid agency professionals (sometimes disparagingly called femocrats), and of women in many kinds of socio-political movements. Arendt proved empirically non-prescient, and normatively regressive in her dismissal of women's politics.

However, there are certain elements in the work of Arendt—in particular, her ideas of association, violence, civil disobedience, and power—which resonate powerfully when brought into dialogue with the work of women actors in the public realm of education and social change. I have chosen from among them two South Asian women, namely Pandita Ramabai and Rokeya Hossain. I have chosen to analyse ideas found in Arendt's essays collected in *Crises of the Republic*: these essays were written in the tumultuous milieu of the 1960s in the USA, when student and Black movements were highly visible. The republicanism of Arendt manifests itself in these essays in an innovative way. Arendt lends her voice, despite reservations, to students and Blacks as they engage in socio-political movements against the US state. She sees such movements as an integral part of the dynamic story of American republicanism, and not as aberrations, as conservative voices would have it.

³⁰ Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, p. 68.

³¹ See, for example, Barnita Bagchi, 'Ramabai, Rokeya, and the History of Gendered Social Capital in India,' in *Women, Education, and Agency 1600-2000*, ed. Maureen Meikle, Jean Spence, and Sarah Aiston (Forthcoming, London: Routledge, 2008); Barnita Bagchi, 'Introduction,' in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag: Two Feminist Utopias* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2005), vii-xxvi.

Arendt, in her essay ‘Civil Disobedience,’³² shows that the movements of civil disobedience in the USA should be viewed in the framework of the social contract found in political theory. At the heart of the American republic is found, she says, the consent of the people, who come together to form society. This social contract, she shows, which one finds in the political thought of John Locke, *precedes* the Constitution and the framework of laws. In the 1960s, Arendt argued, two factors had provoked a constitutional crisis: constitutional rules had been broken too frequently by the executive power, which led people to lose confidence in the procedures laid down by the Constitution; at the same moment, the radical refusal of certain sections of the population to recognise the ‘consensus universalis’ appeared.³³ Which sectors? Mainly the Blacks and the indigenous peoples, because they had been excluded from the political community at the time of the formation of the republic. (For example, Arendt cites the judgement of Dred Scott against Sandford, in the 19th century, which affirmed that the Blacks are not and cannot be considered citizens in the sense in which the federal Constitution understands it.³⁴)

In 1889 Pandita Ramabai published her book *The Peoples of the United States (PUS)*, in Marathi. In that book, at once an essay and a sociological account of her travels to the United States, Ramabai had made a pioneering analysis of American women coming together in associations for the welfare of society. Born in 1858, Ramabai was a famous and controversial woman.³⁵ Her life is like a heroic quest romance, and lends itself well to the Christian and Marathi hagiography that it underwent after her death. Born into a family of itinerant Brahmins, Ramabai was educated by her parents; she learnt to speak and read many Indian languages. All her family except her brother died in a famine. After the death of her brother, Ramabai married a Bengali man who was non-Brahmin. She became a widow nineteen months after the marriage, with an infant girl, Manorama, who became her mother’s helpmate. The young widow, turned reformer, started an association called Arya Mahila Samaj, a group that fought for the education of young women and their marriage at adult age. In 1882, she testified before the Hunter Commission which was sitting in inquiry on the status of education in India; there she recommended the establishment of networks of girls’ schools in which teaching and administration would be carried on by women. She also advocated medical education for women, and when she travelled to England in 1883, she had the intention of becoming a doctor; however, a hearing problem put a stop to these plans.

Ramabai travelled abroad from 1883 to 1888. From 1886 to 1889 she was in the United States. She was a great success, and in great demand as a writer and speaker. She published her book *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* in the USA in 1888; this, as Dalit reformers and educators such as Jotiba Phule recognised, made her an ally of those in the nascent anti-brahmanical movement in Maharashtra. In the USA, more than 75 Ramabai Associations were formed to support financially and morally a school and home for young high-caste widows that Ramabai described in her book.

³² Hannah Arendt, ‘Civil Disobedience,’ in Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic: Lying in Politics; Civil Disobedience; On Violence; Thoughts on Politics and Revolution* (New York: Harvest Books, 1972), pp. 49-102.

³³ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, p. 89.

³⁴ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, p. 91.

³⁵ Cf. Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Ramabai adored the US. But she also critiqued it sharply. In a section titled ‘Charity at the Expense of Others’ in *PUS*, she castigates³⁶ Alexander VI’s imperialist bull of 1493, which divided up between Spain and Portugal the countries then being ‘discovered’ by European powers: how, Ramabai asks, can you give away, ostensibly as a measure of ecclesiastical charity, countries which were not yours to bequeath in the first place? We shall need to incorporate this clear-eyed appraisal of religion working at the service of imperialism when we consider Ramabai’s positive account of women’s charitable work, including religious work: there is a sharp distinction between this latter, and the so-called charity of the religious authorities of European colonizing nations. Ramabai goes on to describe and critique the exploitation and battle waged by white American colonizers against the people she calls ‘our Red brethren’, the Native Americans. The European colonizers are seen as deceitful, manipulative, and bellicose, as a result of which, she says, ‘Today the Indians are scattered all over America like fragments of a glass bowl.’³⁷ Alongside, Ramabai makes the point that Native Americans ‘have no rights as American citizens; they do not even have the right to file a suit against anybody in an ordinary court of law in the United States.’³⁸ It is in the context of this near-absolute disempowerment of Native Americans that she praises white women working with and for the indigenous people; she names Helen Hunt Jackson (1830-1885), author of *A Century of Dishonor* (1881), and Alice Fletcher (1838-1923), who worked for the welfare of the Winnebago and Omaha Indian tribes.

On the whole, Ramabai takes a progressivist view of the condition of Blacks:

*People of the Negro race have been freed from slavery for barely twenty-five years, but the progress they have achieved for their race during this short time through sheer hard work cannot but invite praise for their ceaseless industry and self-reliance...Not a single right which is available to the White citizen of the United States is now denied to the black; and there are favourable signs that the obstacles to social intercourse between the Black and White people which exist today will soon disappear.*³⁹

The piercing analysis of gendered social capital and of the great contribution of American women to the social and public good penned by Ramabai gives a complementary perspective to that of Arendt on the character of the American socio-political situation. Ramabai’s account also stands as a corrective to Arendt’s remarks on women’s movements and politics: even the realm of charitywork, which Arendt conceded women had presented a united front in, becomes, when unpacked, as in Ramabai’s hands, a multifarious area encompassing politics, education, health, periodical publishing, and organized, sophisticated movements such as the Temperance movement. Ramabai shows that women’s associations have political contours: she analyses the birth of the American women’s movement led by women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, originating as it did from Abolitionist movements in which

³⁶ Meera Kosambi, ed. and trans, *Returning the American Gaze: Pandita Ramabai’s The Peoples of the United States* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), p. 65.

³⁷ *Returning the American Gaze*, p. 72.

³⁸ *Returning the American Gaze*, pp. 116-117.

³⁹ *Returning the American Gaze*, p. 115.

male leaders sought to marginalise women. Ramabai gives a ringing account of the National Convention for Women (1848) at Seneca Falls, which started the women's suffrage movement.⁴⁰ Ramabai had, we had noted, established in India a women's association or club called the Arya Mahila Samaj, with branches throughout Bombay Presidency. While some male reformers had welcomed this, B.G. Tilak's conservative, incipiently nationalist newspaper *Kesari* had greeted this with the warning that women should not interfere with the male task of eradicating evil social customs, and that women would have to remain under male control for a long time.⁴¹ So when Ramabai spoke of hostility faced by American women when banding together in reformist associations, she also endorsed this from her own earlier experience.

Ramabai sees the associational power of American women as a prime mover of society and social welfare. The social contract of association, of coming together to form a world or a community, which Arendt saw as foundation of the American republic (preceding as fundamental category even the Constitution) is strongly manifested in the capacity of American women (the majority of them educated and white) to form associations, with complete consent, to do welfarist work in the public sphere. Ramabai's observations on America are applicable to a large number of societies globally even today. But the observations that Arendt made in 'Civil Disobedience' on sections of the American population excluded from the republican 'consensus universalis' offer a critique and complement to Ramabai: the optimism of Ramabai vis-à-vis the supposed advancement of Blacks seems now as in the 1960s to be an illusion, a part of the 'dream deferred' of which the poet Langston Hughes spoke in his poem of that name.⁴²

Education was for Ramabai the most important element for advancing the condition of Indian women. The plan for the widows' home and school which one finds in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* is modern and ambitious.⁴³ In *The High-Caste Hindu Widow*, Ramabai chartered a five-point programme for this home. Apart from the religious freedom the widows would enjoy, they would be given training to become governesses, nurses, and housekeepers; they would also be trained in various kinds of handicrafts according to their inclinations. While the institution would be under the superintendence of Hindu men and women, qualified American men and women would act as teachers, to give the students 'the combined advantage of Eastern and Western civilization and education'.⁴⁴ Well-stocked libraries would be established, as would be lecturerships where the speakers would speak about 'hygiene, geography, elementary science, foreign travel'.⁴⁵ The agenda of the home was thus educational, vocational, wide-ranging, and aimed at giving the inhabitants the best of European/American and Indian worlds. Sharada Sadan and its successor Mukti Sadan are milestones in the global history of real-life and imagined female utopian communities, where the education, professional training, and self-development of marginal women are encouraged.

Ramabai's radicalization and boldness continued. When famine broke out in Gujarat and the Central Provinces in 1896, she moved to a plot of land she owned in

⁴⁰ *Returning the American Gaze*, p. 190.

⁴¹ *Returning the American Gaze*, p. 18.

⁴² Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (New York: Vintage, 1995), p. 426.

⁴³ Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words*, pp. 174-179.

⁴⁴ *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words*, p. 177.

⁴⁵ *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words*, p. 178.

the village of Kedgaon near Pune, and here for the first time she started working with primarily lower-caste women, both famine victims and prostitutes. Mukti Sadan, a Christian institution, was opened here, along with Kripa Sadan, which housed sexually victimized women, blind women, and aged women.

Ramabai was a pioneering generator of ‘gendered social capital,’ by which I refer to the ability of women to create trust, norms, and networks, to use Robert Putnam’s definition;⁴⁶ specifically, I am referring to forms of social capital manifested in welfarist, educational, and developmental associations and institutions. The success of Ramabai as founder and leader of institutions for the welfare of women is of a very high magnitude. It is also important to note that Ramabai was not comfortable with British authority: she came into conflict with the Anglican Church, to which she converted, and she eventually chose an evangelical and non-denominational Protestant Christianity. Her success was contested: neo-Hindu nationalists, such as Tilak, rejected Ramabai because she converted to Christianity. The colonial government, at the same time, viewed Ramabai’s independence and enterprise with suspicion. Ramabai, like Arendt, was a courageous thinker who did not assume populist positions.

From Ramabai, I turn towards political allegories, novels, and essays written by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, educator, creative writer, essayist, and feminist. She founded in Kolkata a school for girls, which exists till today. She was an extraordinary fabulist and polemicist: her little fable ‘Sultana’s Dream’ (1905), written in English, is a masterpiece of utopian feminist writing, as is her Bengali novella *Padmarag* (1924); the latter envisages a community of reformist women.

Arendt had much to say, in her essay ‘Lying in Politics : The Pantagon Papers’ (1969),⁴⁷ in the context of the Vietnam War, of how imperialism functions by using knowledge, and how it produces lies. In her narratives *Jnanaphala*⁴⁸ (The Fruit of Knowledge, 1922) and *Muktiphala*⁴⁹ (The Fruit of Freedom, 1921), Rokeya combined critiques of colonialism and patriarchy. Generically, these works are hybrid: they can be seen as political allegories, as parables, as fairy-tales, and as fables. Rokeya showed, in ‘The Fruit of Knowledge’ and ‘The Fruit of Freedom,’ that British colonialism perpetuated itself by using lies, which disguised as moral welfarism the fact that imperialism deindustrialised India, and that it offered few resources for ameliorating education or health or the welfare of Indians. In these political narratives, Rokeya made women’s education the cornerstone of political freedom for India, and posited causal links between women’s education, women’s agency, and political freedom.

In ‘The Fruit of Knowledge’ (1922), Rokeya regards the eating of the fruit of knowledge in the garden of Eden, through the agency of Eve, in a positive light: Rokeya thus reworks, from a colonial South Asian perspective, a ‘fortunate Fall’ political paradigm.

*Eve requested him to eat the fruit which was in her hands.
Adam too awoke to knowledge on eating the rest of the fruit*

⁴⁶ Robert Putnam, Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) p. 167.

⁴⁷ ‘Lying in Politics,’ in Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, pp. 1-48.

⁴⁸ ‘Jnanaphala,’ in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Rachanasamgraha* (Collected Works), ed. Miratun Nahar (Kolkata: Viswakosh Parishad, 2001), pp. 175-181.

⁴⁹ ‘Muktiphala,’ in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Rachanasamgraha* (Collected Works), ed. Miratun Nahar (Kolkata: Viswakosh Parishad, 2001), pp. 117-139.

from his wife. Then he began to feel his own deprived condition in every layer of his heart. –Was this paradise? This loveless, workless, lazy life—was this the pleasure of paradise? He also realised that he was a political prisoner; he had no ability to set foot outside the boundary of the garden of Eden! In place of a house made of bricks and mortar, he lived in a beautiful palace made of coral and crushed pearls, but he did not have a groat’s worth of things he could call his ‘own’—not even a piece of clothing to wear! What sort of royal pleasure was this? Now the happy dream of heavenly pleasure, which was in fact ignorance, was shattered—he clearly felt the wakeful condition of knowledge.⁵⁰

It is important to remember that the story of Adam and Eve is, though we have chosen to forget this, not a European story but an Asian one, found in the Bible and the Koran. When a Muslim South Asian feminist creates a version of the story vindicating Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit of knowledge, she does not have to go through European writers such as Milton: the tale is a part of her own heritage, and she uses it creatively and politically.

In Rokeya’s parable, one fruit from the Tree of Knowledge falls onto the earth, and a tree is born from it, though human beings are by and large ignorant of the effects of this fruit. Inhabitants of a country called Paristan or Land of Fairies (allegory for Britain and other colonizing countries) get to drink the juice of some of these fruits and gain knowledge. Becoming imperialist traders, they exploit the great wealth of Kanakadvipa, the Island of Gold (allegory for India and other colonized countries), which overflows with food crops, but whose inhabitants live in a state of innocence. Eventually recognising that their country is being drained of its wealth through unequal commerce with Paristan, some of the people of Kanakadvipa get to taste the juice of the Fruit of Knowledge. They then go in search of the original tree that bore the Fruit of Knowledge. To do this, they have to withstand opposition from the inhabitants of Paristan, an allegory of the opposition of imperialists to the colonized gaining emancipatory knowledge. After a long search, the search party finds the tree—it is withered and near-dead, and cannot be made to revive, despite much effort. In a dream, a sage appears to the Kanakadvipa explorers, and tells them,

Two hundred years ago, the selfish, shortsighted, foolish wise men of that country forbade the women to eat the fruit of knowledge; in time, that order became a social edict, and the men monopolised that fruit for themselves. Since they were stopped from picking and eating that fruit, the women did not tend or care for that tree. And since the Tree of Knowledge was deprived of the nurture and care of women’s tender hands, it died. Go, return to your country; go and sow the seeds of those guavas. Let the jinns who want to cut down the guava tree do so; do not stop them—instead, save the seeds in secret. Tend the newly planted sapling, men and women, and you will get the results you hope for. Be careful! Do not deprive your daughters of guavas! Remember

⁵⁰ Hossain, *Rachanasamgraha*, p. 175. Translation by Barnita Bagchi.

*without fail that women have all rights to the fruit which they themselves brought to the earth!*⁵¹

In 'The Fruit of Freedom' (1921), Kanganini, the Pauperess, erstwhile queen of the country of Bholapur, and an allegorical representation of the Indian nation, is shown to be dying under colonialism. The ablest of her various sons, Layek ('The Capable One'), dies; the rest are cowards, sycophants of the British, or corrupt (the allegorically named sons include Darpananda, 'One who Rejoices in His Vanity', Kritaghna, 'The Traitor', Ninduk, 'The Villifier', and Matridrohi, 'Rebel against His Mother'). We are told that the reason for the mother's illness is a curse brought on by an ascetic, due to her treating her daughters as inferior to her sons. The ascetic says to her,

*'Child, it is very unjust that you love your sons far more, while you don't love or care at all for your daughters. As a result, you will suffer because of these spoilt sons...You will have to suffer the results of being the mother of unworthy sons and of being partial in showing love towards your children.' I...asked him, touching his feet, 'When will my curse end?' In answer to that, the ascetic said, 'On Mount Kailasha there is a tree bearing the Fruit of Freedom; the day that someone brings you that fruit and feeds it to you, you will recover.'*⁵²

When Kanganini's cowardly, venal older sons prove incompetent in bringing back the fruit from the closely-guarded gardens of Mayapur (Land of Illusion/Fancy, an allegory for the colonising country), Kanganini's daughters Srimati and Sumati, along with their younger brothers, decide that they will step outside the home, make the arduous journey to Mayapur, and wrest the Fruit of Freedom. In a politically symbolic gesture, Srimati unbinds her hair, and says that she will keep it loose until she is successful in getting the fruit. This is a reworking of an episode in the epic Mahabharata where queen Draupadi decides not to fasten or wash her hair until one of her husbands can bathe her hair in the blood of the enemy prince Duhshasana, who had disrobed her in public. In Rokeya's story, the defiant woman herself decides to act, instead of depending on males to act on her behalf.

Both 'The Fruit of Knowledge' and 'The Fruit of Freedom' are unabashedly political narratives. They are also parables about men's and women's education, women's agency and action, and freedom or liberation. The date of writing of the parables is significant: the Non-Cooperation movement led by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was sweeping India in the period 1921-22: Rokeya's narratives are part of that political mood and moment. The parables are about female (and male) civic participation in a colonial country where the inhabitants have no citizenship rights. Rokeya, a powerful creative fabulist as much as a political one, writes these narratives as a South Asian woman, using topoi from the Koran as much as from South Asian fairytales and myths. Since Arendt saw political action and revolution in narrative and parable form, she could learn much by reading the feminist, socio-political narratives and parables of a South Asian colonial writer and educator such as Rokeya.

⁵¹ Hossain, *Rachanasamgraha*, p. 180. Translation by Barnita Bagchi.

⁵² Hossain, *Rachanasamgraha*, p. 120. Translation by Barnita Bagchi.

Rokeya's presence as a polemical, uncompromisingly feminist writer in the literary public sphere made her job as educator challenging: she could never pass off as a docile teacher helping to turn out equally biddable girls who would not challenge patriarchy or colonialism. But her status as writer also gave Rokeya's work a sharpened edge, greater public visibility, and greater power to mould public opinion about women's education. She combined pedagogic work with action in a more broadly defined social and public sphere; she also encompassed the private sphere through her educational work, as she wrote about the neglect that many girl children coming to her school faced in their own homes.⁵³

The solution that Rokeya offered for the negative forces of Indian patriarchy and British colonialism was women's and men's education. From this education, she argued, an emancipatory knowledge would be born. In her novel *Padmarag*, Rokeya described Tarini Bhavan, a community of women and a feminist utopia situated in the heart of Kolkata. In this institution, not unlike Rokeya's own school, some women, led by a Brahmo widow named Tarini Sen, create a world of welfarist action. The women in the community of Tarini Bhavan (Hindus, Brahmos, Muslims, Christians, Blacks, and Whites) work for advancing healthcare, education, the welfare of the disabled and the handicapped, and run income-generating training courses. This is an integrative model of action by women. For Rokeya, as for Ramabai, the power of women to form associations with the complete consent of the individual women is the principal means of advancing human liberty.

The oeuvre of Ramabai and Rokeya are examples of human action, Arendt's highest and most valorized category. Ramabai and Rokeya linked and bridged *oikos* with *agora*, the home with the world, the private with the public. As so many feminist thinkers have argued, gender when viewed as a political category also conceptualises politics in a new way, one in which women and men both participate; politics is not just a part of the *agora*. Equally, there are many of us cosmopolitan Third World feminists, who, while being proud of being women of colour, also recognise solidarities with other women across countries, borders, races, religions, and communities, and see such projects of contingent solidarity as preferable to being broken into millions of shards according to narrow, strategically reinvented definitions of tradition, culture, and community. Ramabai and Rokeya underscored patterns of commonality and solidarity across borders, while being, each in her own way, powerful South Asian feminists committed to dynamic socio-political, civic participation.

Arendt was a Jewish German woman who spent the larger part of her life in the United States of America. Ramabai was a Brahmin Hindu Indian woman who converted to Christianity, travelled extensively abroad, worked in India, and had strong international supporters and networks in countries such as the United States and Australia. Rokeya was a practising Bengali Muslim woman who published in both English and Bengali, and who engaged in a sustained critique of patriarchy across religions and cultures, including her own. Each of these women was thus in her own way cosmopolitan, and at the same time, pariahs, figures who could not be comfortably assimilated into dominant, mainstream social structures, which they critiqued and worked to change. Ramabai was, because of her conversion to Christianity, in an obvious way cast out of the net of brahminical Hinduism, which she critiqued sharply in *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*. Rokeya remained firmly committed to her faith in Islam, while critiquing vocally the way all religions are susceptible to manipulation

⁵³ Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*, pp. 133-139.

and distortion by vested interests which seek to validate oppression of women by mis-citing religion. This courageous positioning made her (like her fictional alter ego Tarini Sen in *Padmarag*), face degrees of social ostracism.

As we saw, both Ramabai and Rokeya engaged in grounded action in the public realm, especially in the domain of education, acting as leaders and agents of change. They also wrote and published their writing, in which they analysed and synthesised the models of action they practised or admired, using a diversity of genres, among which this paper has paid particular attention to travelogue, parable, and allegory. I have argued that the writing and work of Ramabai and Rokeya show how women can engage as actors in the realm of education, positioned at the intersection of the private, the social, and the political, in a way that can do justice to the delicate balance between the three that ethical pedagogy demands. These two women's work show up some of the limitations of Arendt's taxonomies in her ideas about the private, social, and public spheres, and about what counts as political and what does not. An analysis of the work of Ramabai and Rokeya yields an understanding of the fluid continuum between the spheres of the private, the social, and the political, in which human action manifests its dynamism.

To build this dynamism, imagination is indispensable, even if this imagination has the face of Janus. As Arendt wrote: "The deliberate denial of factual truth—the ability to lie—and the capacity to change facts—the ability to act—are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source: imagination."⁵⁴ This statement, exemplar of Arendt's aesthetic and narrative model of action and politics, stands in all its promise and ambiguity as a concluding epigram to this paper.

⁵⁴ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, p. 5.

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