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Lal, Vinay

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Coming of Age in Nineteenth-Century India: The Girl-Child and the Art of Playfulness.* By Ruby Lal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. xvii plus 229 pp.). Q2

Well over two decades ago, the Indian economist and public intellectual Amartya Sen helped initiate a debate on the “endangered” status of girls and women in Asia and Africa when he argued that 100 million women were “missing,” a third of that number from India alone. The girl-child in India had, by the 1970s, already been the subject of numerous government committee reports, but there was still little awareness of the various largely invisible forms of discrimination, beginning in the womb, that affected girls and women adversely. In many Indian households, to take one illustration, girls eat after boys, and women after men; moreover, girls are given less to eat than boys, and they may be given smaller portions of milk, eggs, and poultry.

The work of the historian Ruby Lal on the girl-child in nineteenth century India is, however, of an altogether different genre, even if it is similarly animated by the desire to make visible certain forms of experience that undergird the lives of what she describes as the girl-child/woman. By the early nineteenth century, the colonial state in India had embraced the view that a civilization was to be evaluated and placed in a hierarchical scale on the basis of how it treated its women. India was found sorely wanting in this respect: colonial texts offered lurid accounts of the practice of sati (widow-immolation), female infanticide, child marriage, and the prohibitions placed on widow-remarriage, even among widows who had not yet achieved puberty and had never consummated their marriage. We need not be detained here by such considerations as whether the position of women in Britain was all that much better and whether the sexual exploitation of girls was not rampant, particularly in view of the vulnerability of working-class women under the new conditions of industrialism. In Britain, as in India, girls generally had little access to education. Likewise, there is by now a sufficiently large literature that has alerted us to the politics of representation and the difficulties that inhere in unmediated readings of colonial narratives. What is most germane is that, throughout the nineteenth century, the picture painted of Indian girls and women was generally one of doom and gloom, ensnared as they were by domesticity, servitude, or the iron laws of patriarchy that bound them to be unflinchingly obedient (as in the classic formulation of the Hindu law-giver Manu) to the authority, successively, of father, husband, and oldest son.

In *Coming of Age in Nineteenth-Century India*, Ruby Lal argues for a very different reading of the spaces available to girls and women for the expression of their subjectivity in nineteenth century north India even as “entire stages and spaces of female lives” were “wiped out” (39). While she is mindful of the duties

imposed upon females and recognizes that many of her subjects found the spaces of freedom fleeting, she nevertheless takes it as her task to argue that a certain playfulness informs female lives, thus “allowing forms of self-expression and literary creativity that are not dependent on masculinist definitions of fulfillment” (39). For too long playfulness has been seen as the prerogative of males, as their “exclusive province,” but Ruby Lal attempts to understand it also as “a nonpaternal practice of the feminine” (55). To delineate the contours of such “playfulness,” she distinguishes between “making” a “woman,” which she characterizes in India and other societies as an invariably “male project,” and “becoming” a woman, which allowed greater room for negotiation (30–34). Becoming a woman, in her view, is not a mere “teleological proposition” (33), one that takes us from a girl to a young woman and then to the exalted state of motherhood and finally to the aging matriarch. Her hyphenated girl-child/woman figure points, in fact, to her interest in the idea of liminality—and where there is the liminal there is also the transgressive. 45 50 55

The ethnographic substance of Lal’s argument is played out in four chapters where she considers the space of the forest, the school, the household, and the rooftops. She turns to an early nineteenth century text, the tale of Rani Ketki by the writer Insha-Allah Khan (1756–1817), where the hero and the heroine meet in a forest. She recognizes, of course, that parallels can be drawn with the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and the scholar of Indian literature has to take great pains to ensure that these great pan-Indian epics do not colonize our understanding of texts and practices drawn from very different times and denude them of their local particularities. Lal is not only sensitive to these considerations but shows how the trope of play is at work in this text: as she points out, “the claim of writing a story in the Perso-Arabic script without using a single word of Persian or Arabic becomes all the more a claim about authorial agility and playfulness” (65). In a similar vein, she describes Insha as “a theorist of playfulness” who systematized Urdu grammar and placed a heavy emphasis on decorum while being “committed to linguistic and gender playfulness” (69). But what is singularly important for her argument is how the characters are constantly leaving behind the *mohalla* (the neighborhood) and the duties concomitant to respectable family living for the forest. Lal describes this as a movement from the spaces of pedagogy to the spaces of pleasure. 60 65 70 75

The most distinct space for pedagogy, initially for boys alone, was of course the school. By the third quarter of the nineteenth century, textbooks for girls had come into shape. Lal’s narrative at this juncture revolves around Raja Shiv Prasad, an inspector of schools in the Benares region and a writer of books such as *Vamamanranjan*, or “Tales for Women.” In 1856, when he first assumed his post, there were no schools for girls; within a decade, twelve thousand girls had been enrolled (98). The matter of textbooks, particularly those focused on the study of history and morals, is too complex to be given any lengthy consideration; but Shiv Prasad’s textbooks are of interest to Ruby Lal since she seeks to understand how girls navigated the space of the school and received the learning that would enable them to engage in various forms of self-making. The emerging centrality of the school in the nineteenth century, as a form not only of socialization of children but also as a technology of governance and a mode for creating national subjects, can scarcely be doubted. Against such a backdrop, Lal’s analysis of the school as a site for “playfulness” is less than persuasive; indeed, the greatest 80 85 90

strength of this chapter resides in her discussion of the debates surrounding “the standardization and the homogenization of languages, scripts, religions and communities” in late nineteenth century India (124).

Lal’s chapter on the “Woman of the Household” has similarly little to say on (to borrow from the subtitle) the “art of playfulness” and is focused on “a number of significant texts concerned with the upbringing and training of respectable (*sharif*) girls and women” (125). These texts, not surprisingly, were concerned rather with the duties of girls and women, the modes of respectability, and the protocols of domesticity. Her gaze extends to several texts, the “dominant motif” of which is *sharafat* or respectability (137); one of the texts in question has a section entitled “Concerning the Chastisement and Regulation of Wives” (139), not really a subject calculated to inspire hope that girls and women could readily escape the constraints placed upon them. A much more promising space for tasting forbidden fruit was the rooftop of the home, which Lal in an imaginative stroke describes as the “the forest” that is transplanted. The rooftop was the extension of the home, used by women and servants, to take one illustration, to put up the day’s washing; however, in another register, it was also the place, not just for dalliances, but for reading and writing. It was the rooftop from which women, when they were still forbidden to take part in the political life of the nation, observed marches and demonstrations. Drawing on Fatima Mernissi’s memoir of growing up in Fez, Morocco, in the 1940s, Ruby Lal quotes her to suggest what possibilities came to mind atop the terrace:

So every morning, I would sit on our threshold, contemplating the deserted courtyard and dreaming about my beautiful future, a cascade of serene delights. Hanging on to the moonlit terrace evenings, challenging your beloved man to forget his social duties, relax and act foolish and gaze at the stars while holding your hand, I thought, could be one way to go about developing muscles for happiness. Sculpting soft nights, when the sound of laughter blends with the spring breezes, could be another (198).

While Lal’s close readings of the texts and of the literary history of nineteenth century north India yield some arresting insights, her argument seems forced at times, just as her neglect of a large swathe of literature that may be useful for her arguments is puzzling. More than six decades after it was first published, Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1950) has still not been superseded in its depiction of the civilizing function of play and the play-forms that are encountered in poetry, philosophy, and art. Considering Ruby Lal’s interest in the categories produced by aesthetics, even Huizinga’s analysis of the play element in the baroque and the rococo could have been productive for her own work. If Huizinga seems too far removed from the Indian context, though his canvas extends to the Mahabharata and the Upanishads, Indian readers might ponder over the relation between the Indo-Islamic or Urdu literature that she peruses and the stories that proliferate in north India on the playfulness of the gopis, the village women who engaged in constant play with the god Krishna. As Ruby Lal doubtless knows, the mythopoetic world in which Krishna and the gopis are immersed was construed by the most positivist of the Indian nationalists as one of the principal sources of India’s subjection to colonial rule. Ironically, for

a book that promises to open up our understanding of the “art of playfulness,” Ruby Lal’s monograph gives insufficient play to the idea of play itself.

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Vinay Lal Q1  
*University of California, Los Angeles*  
*vlal@history.ucla.edu* 140

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