

**CONTESTING SECLUSION FROM LETTERS:
CORNELIA SORABJI'S EARLY WRITINGS ON PURDAH (1902-1903)
DESAFIANDO LA RECLUSIÓN DESDE LOS PERIÓDICOS:
LA OBRA LITERARIA TEMPRANA DE CORNELIA SORABJI SOBRE EL
PURDAH (1902-1903)**

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Decisive political, economic and cultural changes define the four decades that span from 1880 to 1920. Scholars such as Elleke Boehmer (2009, 2015) or Eric Hobsbawm (1987) have argued that the study of these years is key to understand a crucial time for the United Kingdom at the zenith of its Empire. British international politics and its effect in places like India were mostly effective during those years. Actually, Boehmer states that this period of “high imperialism” was its “more officially expansionist, assertive, and self-conscious approach to empire than had been expressed before” (2009: xv). A British attempt at cultural hegemony and linguistic control defines a period of time determined by the arrival of writers from the colonies to the metropolis to, in many cases, question realities on both shores and its interdependent interests. However, these writers are scarcely available in contemporary editions or are part of the academic syllabus. Female writers face an even more prominent invisible.

It is in this context of canonical presences and absences that it is relevant to study Cornelia Sorabji (1866-1954), the first non-British woman to take the BCL degree at Oxford (Boehmer 2009; 494) as well as the first Indian woman graduated in Law and advocate in India (Sorabji, 2010; Vadgama, 2011), challenged the concept of purdah during those years from a literary genre that is neglected in both literary circles and university syllabi, that of letter writing and the writing of articles for newspapers. Sorabji's struggle was that of opening public spaces and institutions for women and, determined by her diasporic experience and studies in both India and the UK, she occupied mediatory positions not only in both cultures but also in the myriad of forms that the interconnection of cultures were unveiling.

In this sense, I have selected her letters to the Editor of *The Times* on 26 September 1892 and 8 January 1903 entitled “Purdanishins in India” and collected in Kusoom Vadgama's *An Indian Portia. Selected Writings of Cornelia Sorabji 1866 to 1954* (2011). It is my interest to analyse how Sorabji portrayed the entrenched ways through which gender, religion and class were instruments of colonisation and how she pleaded legal changes and educational inclusion so that both realities, British and Indian, could reduce the discrimination against women. In the end, I want to highlight the importance of Sorabji and the epistolary genre in tracing down the roots and routes for a social, cultural and political change that proves nowadays so relevant.

1-CORNELIA SORABJI: THE URGENT RECOGNITION OF AN AGENCY BEYOND DOODLES

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India is but a palimpsest of many historical, political, cultural and linguistic influences. And so was the case despite the British Empire desire to simplify and reduce its heterogeneity into a clash of hegemonic binaries defined, for instance, in terms of religion, educational background or proximity to British rulers. The description of India during 1880 and 1920 as a land and mental construct of “connoted diametrical opposites and so harmonized with [...] broad patterns: of splendour set against decline, of immense wealth juxtaposed with abject poverty [containing] Decadence, and its wild freakishness” (Boehmer, 2015: 142) was but a way to reduce, divide and control the many realities that existed in the Subcontinent. Cornelia Sorabji, a “self-proclaimed daughter of the empire” (173), experienced both systems of division and control in terms of education and access (and its lack) to the exercise of her profession as a lawyer. She was “aware that the [legal and educational] institutions in which she sought affirmation gave prominence to Indians who in some way embodied or played to [those binary]western imaginings of India” (177). Although Boehmer recognises that “Sorabji invested heavily in the class status and social respectability that Oxford afforded her as an Indian and a woman” (176), had not been for this experience she would have not known both British and Indian structures and how power politics used the legal and educational systems to suit the interests of only the elite classes in both the UK and India.

As in the case of other female writers such as Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) or Toru Dutt (1856-1877), Cornelia Sorabji used English styles of writing and language but added elements of Indianness that were not static or mimic but that had some agency that aimed at counteracting what Boehmer calls “the image of the east [British audiences] expected to see” (179). Barnita Bagchi (2015) or Meenashi Mukherjee (2000) support the commitment that these writers had in their works despite the rejection shown by critics such as Lotika Basu who criticised the Anglophilia of, for instance, Naidu’s poetry (1933: 94-95). Other coetaneous Indian female writers such as Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), Krupa Sathianadhan (1862-1894), Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) or Muthulakshmi Reddi (1886-1968) also built bridges of understanding and social commitment for women of various classes, religions and educational backgrounds and levels. Tharu and Lalita (1991: xvi-xviii) recognise the importance of their pioneering works and the necessity to highlight them to comprehend the present reality not only of India, the UK or Indians in the UK but, in my view, of the contemporary dynamics of the current society of globalisation we live in.

Cornelia Sorabji appeared on a Google Doodle designed by Jasyot Singh on 15 November 2017 in the UK and India which commemorated her 151 birth anniversary. Joe Sommerlad, in an article for *Independent* entitled “Who was India’s first female lawyer?” (2017) pointed out the social adversity that Sorabji faced “to help hundreds of unrepresented women” with “reforming efforts” at the same time as she “finally opened doors to female lawyers” in 1920s (ibid). Cornelia Sorabji’s nephew, Richard Sorabji, has also underlined his aunt impulse to “opening doors” (2010; ix). Her writing was different to those by the Duleep Singh sisters or Rukhmabai (Boehmer, 2015: 1729 because she illustrated the necessities of social, legal and educational reformation in India and in the UK in terms of accepting Indian citizens. Sorabji herself wrote in the “Stray Thoughts of an Indian Girl” (in Burton, 1998: 60-61; in Vadgama, 2011: 151-154) for the Magazine *Nineteenth Century* (October 1891) to explain her life between India and the United Kingdom and the relevance of living in two worlds at the same time without privileging one or the other but cohabiting both of them.

Sorabji described her own history and short stories in as a person living on and beyond the thresholds of borders in *Love and Life behind the Purdah* (1901), *Sun-*

Babies: Studies in the Child-Life of India (1904), *Between the Twilight* (1908), *The Purdanishin* (1917) and, among others, her autobiography *India Calling* (1932) and *India Recalled* (1936). Besides, she wrote numerous letters and articles for British and Indian newspapers that are gathered and edited in the previously referred Kusoom Vadgama's *An Indian Portia*. (2011) and also in Antoniette Burton's *At the Heart of the Empire. Indian and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (1998). It is in these writings that I recognise that Sorabji expressed an anticolonial commitment that, although conservative, aimed at gender equality. A big opponent to colonial structures, she criticised M. K. Gandhi's ideas of postcolonial Indian nationalism and she ended up aligning with Katherine Mayo's restrictive vision of Indian women in *Mother India* (1927).

In the section "Part II (1894-1902)" of *India Calling* (1937), she recognised that her work as lawyer and writer unveiled a social agency that truly aimed at unveiling an autonomous start for a transformative action. According to this agency that corresponds to part of the temporal frame of this volume, she states in first person, "The work I was doing as a roving and Privileged Practitioner of the Law was without doubt interesting: but it did not amount to beating out a path which other women could follow (qtd. in Tharu & Lalita, 1991: 299). This comment is crucial to understand Sorabji's revolutionary uptake on social reformation despite the tone of her political actions. She was a clear anti-colonial writer who targeted at dismantling what she referred to as "the bonds of Empire" (Sorabji, 1902 in Vadgama 2011: 298).

It is in Sorabji's letters and journalist articles that she hinges her proposals to confront and dismantle imperial power. If Elena M^a Jaime de Pablos wonders *is writing enough?* (2018: 1) when considering colonial and postcolonial writings of resistance, Sorabji binds in her letters an action to change real issues connected with the judicial and educational structures of her times relevant to both the UK and India. Her comments and solutions to the legal and social voids that made widows be unable to enjoy their inherited properties stay in this line of writing. These epistolary creation (later published in articles in, for example, *The Times*) denounces the wrongs suffered by Purdahnishins (women living in purdah) and urges to break with the empire's goal to orientalise and misrepresent India throughout these practices of seclusion that were represented as notion of a decadent and backward India. The analysis of her two letters about Purdahnishin in India written to the editor of *The Times* will shed light from a pair of texts that have been outside the academic canons of literary readings about the years between 1880 and 1920.

2- CONTESTING AN ANOMALY: LETTERS ABOUT PURDAH NISHINS IN INDIA IN 1902 AND 1903

Denouncing the intersection of legal, professional and educational disadvantages for Indian women in India was the main theme in Cornelia Sorabji's letters to the editor of *The Times* and in the epistolary relation she shared with Lady Mary Hobhouse, Florence Nightingale, Adelaide Banning or Sir William Wedderburn (Sommerlad, 2017). Sorabji's letters advocate a desire to, in Rt Hn Lady Hale of Richmond's words, "work hard to improve the education and rights of less fortunate Indian women, to gain legal qualifications in India, and to persuade the British of the need for someone to represent the interests of the purdanashin women whose seclusion meant that they could not look after their own property or communicate with the men who might do so" (2010: 7). Accordingly, the editorial of *Graphic* on 10 March 1888 entitled "The First Girl

Graduate in Western India” praised Sorabji’s result in “elevating the position of her own countrywomen” (qtd. in Vadgama, 2011: 51).

Sorabji’s letters to the Editor of *The Times* called “Purdahnishins in India” and published on 26 September 1902 and 8 January 1903 are examples of Sorabji’s agency to write and change the realities that inflicted pain, suffering and insecurity on, in her own words, “the positions of the least understood of His Majesty’s subjects beyond seas” (1902: 298). Sorabji analyses how colonisation has strengthened gender, religious and class difference among Indian people and how an ineffective legal system, what she calls an “anomaly [that] is obvious” (ibid) is incrementing not only the seclusion of women but the inequality and helplessness they generally faced.

These two letters, published on *The Times*, denounce how the purdah or seclusion of widows did not allow them to inherit their properties with a threefold consequence. Firstly, living in purdah involved a physical impossibility for women to relate with male lawyers. This situation left women in a position of “infants” in legal terms, for they could never amputate the past from their lives (298, 299). Secondly, it fostered the mismanagement of the widow’s properties (300, 315). Thirdly, it fostered that women were to be reduced to “infants” (298), “lunatics” (298) or simply as outsiders in “helpless position” (300). However, Sorabji urged the British administration to change the situation by letting the incorporation of women in the role of legal trustees (298, 300) in lieu of women. This incorporation of women to the exercise of Law would foster the education of women and a prospect professional performance of those women who were studying (300).

The integration of women to the professional sphere would resolve, in Sorabji’s words, “the cry of injustice or inconvenience of wrong” (315) that define the “disability” of the British legal jurisprudence in India (315-316). This perspective clearly exemplifies what the British politician M. E. Grant Duff recognised in Sorabji’s “plan for ameliorating, in a most important particular, the lot of a large portion of the women in India” (1902: 305). Then, there is a subsequent action behind Sorabji’s writing that performed an engagement of different British spheres in India to appoint a real change.

In the first letter to the editor (1902), to whom she addresses as “*Sir*”, Sorabji traces the origins and differences of three different Purdahnishin: the “Hindu”, “the Mahomedan” and the “particularities” of the “South India” (that she would not refer back in any of the two letters) (298). Sorabji clarifies that she will deal with “the Hindu Purdahnishin [which] did not exist in ancient India, but is one result of the Mahomedan invasion of the country [so that] women were secluded in self-defence” (ibid). Then she talks about how the legal system in India gave more rights to women than the British women in the UK as per “the Married Womans Property Act of 1882” (ibid) adding that, as a consequence of the existent purdah, these “rights” could never materialise because the “physical position of women is that of an infant” (ibid).

This incongruity between rights and performance of legal possibilities for widows is aggravated because women in India, as consequence of their seclusion, are “illiterate, even as regards her own vernacular” (ibid). Sorabji continues explaining that despite these women do have “considerable business” there is a dependence on a “he” who is their “only door to the outside business world” (ibid). Under this condition, Sorabji exclaims that “the ‘opportunity’ of darkness and seclusion is always available” (ibid). This necessity on a third male person to mediate so that women can exercise legitimate right over their own property also entails “the danger of the position of trust [...] if the trustee abuses his trust” (299).

Sorabji details the position of women “in Law Courts” and that there is a “Collector or Adminsitrator whose duty is to attend to [the widow’s demands]” (ibid) and how this male mediator only “sees her blindfold, so to speak, for he may converse through the Purdah alone” (ibid). She points at the similarities of this subaltern position for “Hindu” and “Mahomedan” women although it is a bit more complicated in the case of the latter (ibid). She writes, “Cannot some way of help [for Purdahnishins] be found? Something which will not offend the prejudices and customs of the people, and yet be sufficiently intelligent and interpretative of the need?” (ibid). She proposes the figure of a “woman adviser” (300) who acts as “mukhtar [person of power] or vakil [agent of law]” (ibid) as a way to secure the exercise of women in “a position which would need tact and sympathy as well as legal knowledge and business capacity” (ibid). Female education was improving, as in the case of Sorabji herself, and shee writes, “Oxford and Cambrdge [...] are producing women who do good” (ibid). Although she later uses two adjectives that are but extensions of a male-dominated stream of thought such as “cool-headed” and “non-hysterical” (ibid), Sorabji promotes the active presence of women and calls in the benefits of female education as it had been the case when the acceptance of women in the exercise of medical aid (ibid).

She accompanies her testimony with the reproduction of letters from British personalities working in the legal authorities of India who support her ideas. This is the case of “The Hon Mr Justice Ameer Ali, of the High Court, Calcutta” (300) who recognises the “helpless position” of women in legal participation as if “they were infants” (ibid). In his opinion, the participation of women in the legal system could ease not only their position as secluded subject but also “the Government” in dealing with those “poor women” (ibid) Sorabji also quotes “The Hon Mr Justice Knox, of the High Court, Allahabad” (301) who centres on the positive results that the introduction of Purdandish women in the legal structure could have (ibid). Equally, there is an excerpt from “The Hon Mr Justice Blair, of the High Court” (ibid) who states that “there must be many such women advisers” because it is necessary to include women “as free agents” as in the case of the “introduction of women doctors” (303). The inclusion of these letters within her own epistle clearly braces her points and adds a recurrent of her agency relevant to both British and Indian structures of political and educational power.

In the letter “To the editor of *The Times*, 8 January 1903” (1903: 315), Sorabji retails how one widow “is in great privation, and penniless [...] [because] a strong man armed takes away from an old and ‘disabled’ and unprotected widow a thing that is her very own” (ibid). She retails the case and questions the urgency to incorporate women in the judicial system and deprive men of their privileged hegemony to facilitate that women leave the legal seclusion they live in. (ibid). She accordingly questions, “Does this case not suggest that there ought to be some central political revisional jurisdiction in India, corresponding to the revisional High Courts?” (ibid). Her endeavour, as she writes, is that of pointing out “the cry of injustice or inconvenience or wrong” (ibid) in “the British administration in native States” (316) urging to open a “shut door” (ibid) that could ease the conditions for both by allowing and facilitating that the Purdahnishins leave their position of seclusion.

It is here that Sorabji calls for women to access the exercise of a professional activity such as that of legal trustee or mediator as well being recognised in the legal system. And this is something that she wrote (and was published about) in the early 20th c., much before she obtained the recognition to professionally exercise her qualification as legal advocate at Indian High Courts after years of running a centre of legal advice in Calcutta without being authorised to legally exercise her role as lawyer. This triple victory (being published, studying and being legally authorised to act as a lawyer)

clearly illustrates Sorabji's contest to seclusion and the political and legal structures that so for sustain them.

3- SOLVING THE ANOMALY: WRITING AND ENACTING THE POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE THROUGH LITERATURE

Cornelia Sorabji was a writer and social agent during the climax of the British Empire. Born in India, she studied, wrote and contested the different myriads of control enacted by British administration. She was truly anticolonial although she also shared a conservative agenda in relation to the representation of women outside and within India. Nevertheless, she developed a firm commitment to break the shackles of gender discrimination that defined her contemporary society. In the two letters analysed, Sorabji writes to the Editor of *The Times* explaining the obscure motivations between the purdah and its terrible effects on Purdahnishin. She does not only retail the wrongs but offers solutions that involve the incorporation of women to the professional practice of law, the implementation of women's access to work and so the true belief in how women can study and undertake a job in social spheres.

Solving the absence of writers such as Cornelia Sorabji or genres such as the epistolary correspondence proves very relevant to understand the absence of writers like Sorabji in syllabus, the lack of letters as case-study texts to analyse and, most important, the way history has been told. Literature and both its creation and study emerge as forces that can solve political anomalies such as, following Sorabji's letters, the seclusion of women from having access to their inherited powers. It is our possibility to highlight, recover and incorporate these writers and writers to perform a change that transforms the irregularities of contemporary reality.

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