

Title—Colonial Masculinity: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century

Author—Mrinalini Sinha

Year—1995

Categories: Gender, Colonialism, Empire, Culture

Place: Indian Subcontinent

Time: 1870-1900

Argument Synopsis:

Sinha’s book is about the processes and practices through which two differently placed elites, the manly Englishman and the effeminate Bengali, were constituted in nineteenth century India. She argues that the emerging dynamics between colonial and nationalist politics in the 1880s and 1890s in India is best captured in the logic of colonial masculinity. She reveals that colonial masculinity affected both the colonizer and the colonized. These categories of colonizer and colonized are not fixed or self-evident—there is a constant need to redefine these categories. Sinha traces the impact of colonial masculinity in four specific controversies: the ‘white mutiny’ against Ilbert Bill in 1883, the official government response to the Native Volunteer Movement in 1885, the recommendations of the Public Service Commission in 1886, and the Indian opposition to the Age of Consent Bill in 1891. Her argument relies on the assumption that the contours of colonial masculinity were shaped in the context of an imperial social formation that included both Britain and India. Sinha examines how colonial masculinity, in the context of the changes in the imperial social formation in the late nineteenth century, produced and exploited categories such as the ‘Bengali *babu*.’ The figures of the manly Englishman and the effeminate Bengali were produced by and helped to shape the shifts in the political economy of colonialism. These notions cannot be understood in isolation from each other.

Her book aims to understand the significance of imperialism in the construction of both national British and colonial Indian politics of masculinity. Nineteenth century British masculinity itself was implicated in the history of British imperialism. Sinha claims that the full constitutive impact of the colonial experience on the making of British masculinity remains insufficiently studied in the literature. She contributes to the understanding of the exercise of colonial power in late nineteenth century India. To do so, she draws upon recent scholarship that rethinks the orientalist enterprise and the critiques of orientalism from a historical materialist perspective—central is the attempt to locate the orientalist enterprise more securely as part of a broader social transformation. Sinha demonstrates that it was precisely because colonial race relations were constantly rearticulated in response to changes in material conditions that a universalizing account of colonial race politics cannot be adequate for understanding these colonial constructs. She demonstrates how over time effeminacy became attributed very specifically with Western-educated Indians, reflecting the political challenge posed by the Indian middle class to certain exclusive British rights and privileges in India. The book is organized into four chapters, organized both chronologically and thematically, each examining the implications of colonial masculinity and effeminacy in separate colonial controversies. Sinha studies colonial masculinity as a historical phenomenon that responded to the economic, political, and cultural shifts in the imperial social formation in the late nineteenth century.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Concept of effeminacy embodied the notions about the decline and degeneration of contemporary Indians
- Gender was an important axis along which colonial power was constructed
- The category of gender itself was never distinct from national, class, caste, and racial categories