Eighteenth Century Women: An Anthology

By Bridget **Hill**

George Alien and Unwin, London, 1984.

THIS is a collection of writings about women in eighteenth century England, culled from a wide range of primary sources such as contemporary essays, novels, poems, travelogues, official documents, treatises, memoirs, diaries, personal letters, newspapers and periodicals. The writings are divided into sections highlighting different aspects of women's lives, and each section is prefaced by the author.

Broadly, the writings fall into two categories:

1. exhortations enjoining women's duties upon them, for example: "She who marries ought to lay it down for an indispensable maxim, that her husband must govern absolutely and entirely, and that she has nothing to do but to please and obey." (p. 22) Along with these are essays, some anonymous, others by pioneers like Mary Wollstonecraft, that attempt to challenge the dominant ideology.

2. descriptions of the living and working conditions of women.

I found the former interesting insofar as they showed that the ideology of domination, segregation and innate inferiority or superiority is by no means exclusive to any one race or religion. The concentrated accumulation of statements declaring suffering and sacrifice for her family to be woman's lot, because she is formed by nature and god for dependence, whether as daughter, wife or mother, make very depressing reading.

The only ray of hope was that offered by hindsight—the material condiiions of most women in England have, in some ways, altered for the better since the eighteenth century, and women, in spite of the restrictive ideology dinned into their heads, did seize upon and make use of whatever opportunities became available to them, whether these were legal rights, more remunerative employment or contraception. This suggests that it is not so much ideology which keeps women submissive as the lack of visible alternatives

However, I found the second category more enlightening. Bridget Hill chose the eighteenth century for her research on women because she felt that it has been ignored by most women historians who have preferred to concentrate on the nineteenth century, particularly on the women's movement, perhaps because they felt an affinity with these ancestors of feminism. She thinks, however, that it is important to understand not just the inspiring but also the nonheroic aspects of women's history, hence her choice of this period.

In the eighteenth century, the majority of the population of England lived in rural areas and depended for a livelihood on the land. Women were active in agricultural work, whether as hired labourers or on their own family farms. Hill's assessment is that though this did not give them real equality with men, it did make for some sort of working partnership between husband and wife in the rural family.

But, as she puts it : "In the course of the century changes took place in agriculture which profoundly influenced women's work." Agriculture became more capitalised, that is, more prosperous farmers began to enlarge their estates by buying up the land of their poorer neighbours, and by appropriating waste lands which had been formerly used in common by the village community for such purposes as gathering of fodder and fuel, grazing of animals, catching of small game and so on. This trend was accompanied by increasing specialisation whereby farmers in certain areas concentrated more on certain crops or on dairy, pig or poultry farming.

These trends had several consequences for women. First, as the middle peasants and traders grew more prosperous, they withdrew the women of their families from work outside the house. It was considered a sign of respectability for a man to have an "unemployed" wife and daughters. While this may have meant increased leisure for this group of women, Hill argues that it also meant loss of status within the family since they were now perceived as, at best, ornaments, at worst, a burden. Many recent studies have revealed that the same pattern has been developing in many parts of India in the last few decades.

On the other hand, the labouring poor found it more and more difficult to eke out a subsistence. Smallholders were squeezed out and reduced to hired labourers. Further, common rights such as the right to glean or collect leftover grain after the harvest, the right to graze animals on waste land, the right to gather fodder, fuel and herbs from the forest, the right to hunt small game, had been crucial to the survival of the poor, and now became inaccessible to them. Hill cites cases of poor women having been, punished and humiliated for continuing these practices.

Thus, so called agricultural development in the eighteenth century meant an erosion of many women's employment. In Hill's words, it "meant the loss of their ability to contribute to the family income by labouring on their own or common land. It meant that women became more dependent on seasonal wage labour in work of an increasingly restricted nature. It meant, finally, that where work was available to them it was the poorest paid but not the least arduous."

The rural poor had always supplemented their income by

cottage industries. For women, spinning was the most widespread employment. The word "spinster" originally meant a woman who earned her living by spinning.

In the eighteenth century, decline of agricultural work for women was accompanied by a decline in cottage industry. By 1770, mechanisation of the textile industry had already led to the growth of the first factories for cotton manufacture. By 1780, hand spinning of cotton had virtually ceased. Hill points out that few of the women rendered unemployed in rural areas were absorbed into the factories. Factory labour consisted primarily of young unmarried girls.

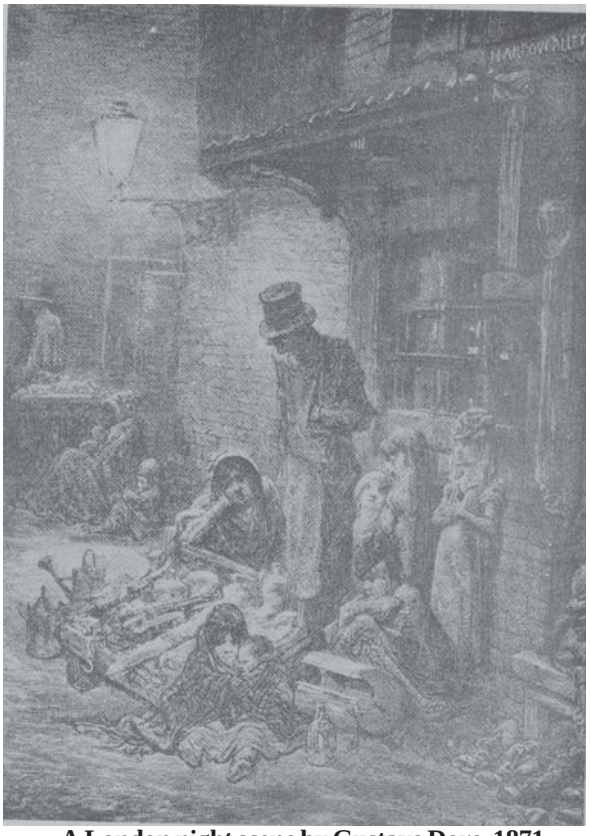
What then happened to the rural women who lost their employment ? They took whatever work was available. Field labour available to women was seasonal which meant underemployment. Other kinds of work available were hard manual labour like carrying headloads in markets, mines, construction sites or fields, or fine work like lace making and basket making which was done in unsanitary conditions and often resulted in permanently deforming the woman's body and ruining her eyesight.

Hired labourers on farms were often severely overworked. For instance, girls aged 10 to 12 had to do heavy work such as raking up dung from the paths with a fork, while a milkmaid's day usually began at 4 a.m. and went on till 9 at night, with the result that her fingers were frequently frozen to the tone.

In the mines, women, clad in filthy rags, carried headloads so heavy that tears streamed down their faces when they toiled up the slopes to the surface. They often carried as much as two tons in a day, The wage was eight pence a day. In all spheres of labour, women were uniformly paid less than men, on an average half a man's wage.

As unemployment mounted, large numbers of people were thrown into destitution. In support of her contention that women, particularly single women and widows, bore the brunt of poverty, Hill reproduces poor relief lists that were maintained by village authorities. In one typical list, 62 people are stated to be totally destitute in a particular village. Of these, five are men and 57 are women and their children. Of the men, two are disabled and three are stocking weavers who had obviously been rendered unemployed due to industrialisation. Of the women, a majority are widows and deserted wives.

When women were thrown out of their traditional fields of employment, fewer alternatives were available to them. The responsibility of bringing up the children frequently fell on the mother. Such women were seen as burdens on the village community by the local authorities who often tried to force them to migrate. The misery of these women and their children is documented by contemporary newspaper reports of destitute women found frozen to death, having tried to consume inedible roots, or found lying dead of starvation in abandoned buildings in towns where they had migrated but failed to find work.



A London night scene by Gustave Dore, 1871

Among those who migrated to towns in search of employment, a large number of women were recruited into prostitution. There was a flourishing trade in girl children. Hill cites horrific reports of young girl prostitutes in prisons, eaten up by disease and vermin. Equally horrific is the self righteous tone in which contemporary commentators pour contempt on these "vicious" women.

Hill's thesis is that domestic service was one of the major new fields of employment opened to women and that historians have looked in the wrong places for the female labour force. The rising middle class measured the status of a family by the number of domestic servants it employed. The domestic servant in urban areas had access to relatively better living conditions and marriage opportunities, so the post of ladies' maid was a sought after one, but in rural areas, maidservants had to perform farm labour as well as household labour, and the job was, a very heavy one.

Sexual exploitation was a widely prevalent job hazard. She reproduces a number of newspaper reports of women who killed their illegitimate infants or themselves after employers or fellow servants who had seduced them refused to marry them. A much larger number of such women were pushed into prostitution.

I was surprised to find so many parallels in the conditions of poor women in eighteenth century England and in twentieth

century India. Relatively fewer parallels were visible in the life of middle and upper class women. For instance, though a semi or fully arranged marriage was the dominant form, the desirability of some element of "love" in marriage was more universally acknowledged, and the dominant opinion, as reflected in contemporary literature, religious and secular, seems to have been that parents had the right to forbid their daughter to marry a man she liked, but not to force her to marry one she disliked, although of course this precept was honoured more in the breach than in the observance.

There is sufficient evidence of the prevalence of wife beating which was socially and even legally sanctioned, but domestic violence on women also assumed more indigenous forms. For instance, the device of a husband getting rid of his wife by declaring her mad and consigning her to a private mad-house where conditions would probably drive her insane, seems to have been not uncommon.

The laws were peculiarly discriminatory and harsh. A married woman had no legal status. She could not own property, fight a case or enter a contract in her own name, since her identity was merged with that of her husband. Yet the punishments for women were often more severe than those for men. For instance, a woman who killed her husband was considered to have committed a crime equivalent to treason by rebelling against her "lord" so she was much more severely punished than a man who killed his wife.

Another somewhat unique phenomenon is the existence of a relatively large number of single women, in spite of the fact that marriage was considered the only desirable destiny for a woman, and contempt was poured out on "old maids" who were perceived as failures and as a burden on the community. Hill does not find a wholly convincing explanation of this phenomenon which needs to be investigated further. She does, however, suggest that single women, many of whom were "learned women", were in the vanguard of the women's movement in the next century.

While that movement was led by educated women, the last section of this book documents some of the prefeminist struggles waged by women in eighteenth century England, around issues such as food, price rise, common rights. These make very interesting reading, for example, there are newspaper reports of mobs, in some cases consisting chiefly of women and in other cases wholly of women, who insisted on wheat being sold at a fair price (1757), broke open a storehouse and carried off the wheat being hoarded by a farmer (1753), destroyed the fences that had been put up to enclose common land in a village, were arrested but rescued from the officers by the populace (1771), held popular protests demanding bread (1880), and so on.

Reading this book made me feel more intesely my complete ignorance of the lives of women in eighteenth century India or indeed, in any period before that. Very little study has so far been done on the life conditions of ordinary women in India, even in the nineteenth century.

The history taught in our schools and colleges tends to be still overwhelmingly "political" or rather "dynastic" history, an account of kings and the wars they fought, that is, an account of the doings of a very small minority of people who happened to be in power at certain places. The lives of the vast majority of people are barely documented and are therefore dismissed out of hand with a few comments.

Women are usually mentioned in a paragraph entitled "Position of women" and based on a couple of contemporary texts. A couple of generalisations like "Women were respected" and a mention of the names of a few queens or female mystics is considered more than sufficient.

This book gives the student of history some idea of the kind of sources that should be looked at, and the alertness with which references to women must be sought out. As Hill says, women are usually mentioned as "asides and afterthoughts" in the sources, but her work has unearthed significant details in the most unlikely places. To give just one example, in a treatise entitled "A narrative of the building and a description of the construction of the Eddystone lighthouse with stone', 1791.

Her painstaking work to put together some parts of a picture of how women lived, worked and struggled at a time when few of them were in a position to record their thoughts and feelings, gives an indication of how challenging is the task of writing women's history, and how rewarding it can be.

—Ruth Vanita