

***Review of Specters of Mother India: The Global
Restructuring of an Empire by Mrinalini Sinha,
Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006.***

Sharon Pillai

Jesus and Mary College, Delhi University

Mrinalini Sinha's *Specters of Mother India* "furnish[es] the narrative of a small episode" that it claims was "the 'tipping point' for an important historical transformation in the period between the two world wars" (p. 1). The episode in question is the publication in 1927 of Katherine Mayo's hugely controversial *Mother India* and its checkered afterlife in socio-political debates. In her theoretical introduction, Sinha begins by designating the entire Mayo-*Mother India* imbroglio "an event" (p. 4), which, after the fashion of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze et al., is construed to represent a moment of rupture (p. 257-58). The heuristic of the "imperial social formation" (p. 17) further reconfigures her subject matter as an event not merely of local, regional or national cause and consequence, but one of global provenance and purport. It is with these premises that Sinha turns the many "specters of Mother India" into a radical biography of Mayo's book "that constantly exceeds the framework of familiar narratives" (p. 7).

The opening chapter of *Specters of Mother India* shows how the significance of Mayo's intervention derives "from the global dynamics of the interwar period" (p. 24) rather than simply the nationalist-imperialist dialectic. Chapter Two follows up with an overview of the specific track of Mayo's "Transatlantic Intervention" (p. 66). The third chapter, titled "Ironic Reversals," highlights how critics and commentators appropriate and domesticate Mayo's "facts" "to repudiate her basic conceptual paradigm of the relationship between the social and the political" (p. 110), thus rendering *Mother India* variously counterproductive. "Refashioning Mother India," the next chapter, focuses on the Sarda (Child Marriage Restraint) Act of 1929 which marked the end of the Mayo-Mother India controversy. Projected as a

triumphant nationalist response to Mayo's offensive, the Sarda Act, according to Sinha was significant for the "reconstitution of the hitherto dominant relationship between women, community and the state" (p. 155)—the recognition of women as full-fledged rights-bearing subjects in the state, as a legitimate political constituency in their own right. The last chapter, "Ambiguous Aftermath," elucidates the intricacies of a "historical turn that need not have been" (p. 197). It delineates how the women's movement, caught between conflicting stakes in universal individual rights and the autonomy of minority communities in the lead up to the Government of India Act 1935, decided to support an abstract (as opposed to a political) individualism (p. 212). Sinha argues that this resolution was both contingent and unfortunate: Class-determined, it turned women's collective political agency into "ideological cover for a unitary nationalist imagination that was implicitly a reconstituted male, Hindu and upper-caste conception" (p. 247). Finally, the Epilogue has a brief discussion of Mehboob Khan's iconic recreation of "Mother India" as a cinematic text that not only expunges Mayo's polemic from the national memory, but also presents "a contingent politics of the nation as natural and inevitable by repressing all awareness... [of] alternatives to that politics" (p. 250). Sinha offers her book, among other things, as precisely a counter to such erasures and reconstructions.

Specters of Mother India engages the Mayo-*Mother India* controversy from a range of addresses, extensive and intensive in equal measure. For the most part, this produces a fascinating read. There are reservations, however, about some of Sinha's representations and inferences; for instance, the recourse to Lata Mani's formulation of women as neither subjects nor objects but merely the "ground" of debate in her influential essay "Contentious Traditions." Mani argues her thesis in the context of Sati debates in early nineteenth-century India. In Chapter One, Sinha begins by citing Mani in relation to "early imperialist and reformist initiatives at social reform for women" (p. 43). Yet the discussion that follows appears to encompass all nineteenth-century social reform debates. It is unclear in this chapter if the extension of Mani's thesis is deliberate. Sinha returns to Mani in

Chapter Four: Claiming agency for women in the Sarda Act debates, she clearly states that Mani's "logic...with few modifications could be extended to most nineteenth century public debates on social reforms for women in India" (p. 153). However, the note appended to that sentence offers a substantial qualification: "This is not to suggest...women did not contribute to previous debates on social reform legislations. Yet in the debates on the Sarda Act, the contribution of women entered the public discourse in ways that provided it with unprecedented public legitimacy" (p. 307, n10). The latter point that Sinha wishes to make is both important and persuasive. Nonetheless, evidence simply does not bear out claims that women were merely the "ground" of debate throughout nineteenth-century social reform initiatives. Indeed, two women Sinha herself mentions, Pandita Ramabai and Rakhmabai, were sufficiently "ground"-breaking to disprove this representation.

Sinha's assertions on the "Hindu, upper-caste, and male" character of the "abstract citizen" produced in the dying years of the British Raj, likewise, elicit ambivalence. Sinha adeptly reveals how this particular character came to be in the wake of the Mayo-Mother India controversy. It is her implications and inferences regarding the nature of power this consolidation carries that are less convincing. Unless a simplistic interchangeability between caste and class is assumed, any notion of this default character of the ideal citizen as a seamless confluence of power gets problematized at the outset. Also, the jump from identifying the default character of the modern Indian citizen to asserting a "reconstituted and unmarked Hindu hegemony" (p. 241) seems rash. Not only because "Hindu" may be a somewhat misleading phrase (there being no well-defined set of people or practices it always references) but also because the "hegemony" that Sinha ascribes to the default character is paradoxical—hegemonic only so long as it remains "unmarked." In practical terms, this may not always translate as particularly empowering.

The above criticisms notwithstanding, *Specters of Mother India* pushes the field of historical research in new directions. Arguably, its most exciting contribution is the “double move” facilitated by Sinha’s “dense global narrative of intersecting histories: both the demonstration of generic European concepts as partial or parochial, and their simultaneous remaking as potentially universal” (p. 16). Scholars interested in post- and anti-colonial debates, in the history and contribution of the women’s movement in India, in early twentieth-century transnational feminist networks and networkings, will all find Mrinalini Sinha’s *Specters of Mother India* a rewarding read.