



WOMEN IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

Bhavna Dahiya

St Stephen's College India

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 12th January, 2022

Received in revised form 23rd February, 2022

Accepted 7th March, 2022

Published online 28th April, 2022

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the theme of 'women' in Early modern Europe. It outlines the role of women in the public sphere of politics, enlightenment and French salons. Did women participate in making, shaping and formulating this space? Were women involved in moulding and directing opinions and prevalent views in this period? If so, then how did Early Modern women take part in the public Sphere?

Key words:

Women, public sphere, enlightenment, gender, politics, salons, public participation

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INTRODUCTION

Earlier studies of the Early Modern period hardly focused on gender, but from the 1960's onwards, it was seen as a key determinant of social and cultural change in Europe. Historians like Joan Kelly, Merry Weisner Hanks, Karen O'Brien, Dorinda Outram, Barbara Taylor etc. have provided us with glimpses into the prevalent gender roles and norms, attitudes towards women and their changing status in this period.

For many scholars, the Early Modern is a period of overall improvement in the status of women with developments like Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment weakening the shackles around women and offering them more opportunity and access to education, public sphere etc. But for scholars like Joan Kelly and others, women had actually enjoyed greater freedom and opportunities in the medieval period. Early Modern society was a more patriarchal, regulated and ordered one which accorded a limited space to women to intervene in the public sphere and activities. Some women, however, continued to successfully challenge these restrictions and norms.

Public Sphere is a term commonly used to refer to the realm of social life/ space where different opinions are expressed, articulated, discussed, transmitted and established. Any place or medium through which individuals and groups could meet and interact and mould and form such opinions would classify as being part of the public sphere- newspapers, periodicals, books, encyclopaedias, coffeehouses, academies, salons, Republic of Letters etc. Such a sphere was emerging in Europe from the 17th c., independent from the key institutions of power, the Church and the Court. Jurgen Habermas's book

The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962) examines the genesis of the bourgeois public sphere in the early modern period as a result of the changing political-economic and social life in Europe. It was driven by a rising capitalist class which required an independent social arena to exchange and discuss their ideas. It was a result of changes like growing literacy and education, growth of critical spirit and decline of the authority of Absolute State and Church and Aristocracy, extension of constitutional democracy and liberal political ideas, economic development, etc. As Habermas says, the new public sphere and the network of academies, salons, etc. catered to the new groups who). But Habermas and other theorists of the public sphere have not examined the role of women in this emerging social domain in detail.

Did women participate in making, shaping and formulating this space? Were women involved in moulding and directing opinions and prevalent views in this period? If so, then how did Early Modern women take part in the public Sphere?

We will discuss a few ways through which women in the Early Modern period exercised political agency and participated in the flourishing public sphere of 17th-18th c.

Women and Politics

Though active politics was seen as the domain of men, many regions in Europe had female rulers and many women were considered a powerful part of the ruling elite. The political theory of the period was mostly against female sovereignty, with most political writers and theorists excluding them from their discussions about the basis of power, ideal sovereignty, etc. But we do see a change taking place from the late 17th c. onwards with women being considered as political beings by

*Corresponding author: **Bhavna Dahiya**
St Stephen's College India

many. Writers like Jean Bodin (d.1596) and Robert Filmer (d. 1653) considered women's rule to be unlawful, unnatural and immoral. Bodin gave a list of female vices that make them naturally inferior to man, while Filmer insisted that rulers derive all legal authority from the divinely sanctioned fatherly power of Adam.

But others argued that being a woman doesn't automatically exclude one from Kingship. For many this meant that female rulers should exhibit masculine traits and qualities (Something that Elizabeth I of England was praised for by contemporary writers. She was seen as an 'honorary male', like other female rulers!). Late 17thc. And 18th c. political theorists like Hobbes (d. 1679) and Locke (d. 1704), despite believing that women were inferior to men by nature, are often regarded as early champions of female rulership and participation in politics. Locke, especially, put women on equal footing as men when it came to status in the family, participation in the public and political sphere.

The French philosophes like Voltaire (d. 1778) and Montesquieu (d. 1755) argued that women were 'inferior' to men but could be effective as heads of states and enlightened monarchs. Their contemporary, French thinker Marquis de Condorcet (d. 1794), however, advocated for equal rights and opportunities for women. Unlike Rousseau (d. 1778), he did not believe that women were naturally only inclined for the domestic sphere and had a very limited role in the public sphere. Condorcet and Mary Wollstonecraft (d. 1797) argued that women were competent for any public activity or office, but were lacking in education and training, which had been denied to them so they could not develop their intellectual abilities.

Some of the powerful women in European politics in 17th-18th c. were- Marie de Medici (d. 1642), Anne of Austria (d. 1666), Queen Christina of Sweden (d. 1689), Queen Anne of England (d. 1714), Maria Theresa of Austria (d. 1780), Empress Catherine of Russia (d. 17960) .

Women and Enlightenment

As seen above, Enlightenment thought and discourse was often contradictory when it came to women and their role in an enlightened society. We should not have a monolithic understanding of this period when it comes to women. It was a pivotal period for the development of feminist ideology and demand for equal rights, but in the same period, the idea of separate spheres for men and women was firmly established and legitimized. Women's status was simultaneously elevated and their role in the public sphere was curtailed. Many philosophical and scientific writings from this period implied that women were an inferior group in the species meant for nurturing, but other writers tried to give them an equal status. Despite the limitations and restrictions placed on them, women took an active interest in the world of Enlightenment. They wrote extensively, took part in intellectual and political discussions, participated in academies, salons, encyclopaedias and other institutions of Enlightenment. More and more women, especially from the upper and bourgeois classes, were exposed to the ideas of Enlightenment and made use of the ongoing developments to participate in cultural-social-political world of 18th c and embraced the more egalitarian and cosmopolitan ethos of Enlightenment than their male counterparts.

Leading women writers and thinkers included – Mary Wollstonecraft (d. 1797), Olympe de Gouges (d. 1793), Catherine Macaulay (d. 1791), Mary Astell (d. 1731), Emilie du Châtelet (d. 1749) Louise d'Épinay (d. 1783), Elizabeth Montagu (d. 1800), Madame de Staël (d. 1817) etc.

Leading female scientists included- Mary Cavendish (d. 1673), Eleonor Glanville (d. 1709), Mary Somerset (d. 1715), Emilie du Châtelet (d. 1749), Laura Bassi (d. 1778), Christina Roccati (d. 1797), Maria Ardinghelli (d. 1825), etc.

Leading women artists included- Artemisia Gentileschi (d. 1656), Giovanna Garzoni (d. 1670), Elisabeth Cheron (d. 1711), Luisa Roldan (d. 1706), Angelica Kauffman (d. 1807), Marie Gabrielle Capet (d. 1818), Madame le Brun (d. 1842)

Women and French Salons

Salons in late 17thc. And 18th c. France was one of the most important aspects of the Enlightenment public sphere. They have been called the 'engines' of Enlightenment. They were social gatherings organised at the houses of prominent aristocratic and bourgeois women who hosted meetings and discussions on a wide variety of topics. For Habermas and other scholars, they were necessary for the development of a non-state, democratic, debate-oriented public sphere in Europe where people from different backgrounds and countries could meet and interact. Other scholars see a more limited role for these salons as they were elitist, had limited membership and reach and did not encourage dissent or radical ideas.

Nearly all such salons were organised by elite women who emerged as powerful hostesses / salonnières, patrons and participants in this institution of Enlightenment. They set an agenda for every meeting, invited leading philosophers and artists to take part, scouted for new talent to recruit for their salons etc. Artists and writers and other dignitaries wanted to be invited to the prestigious salons which were a hallmark of civility and polite society. Each salon had a core membership and fixed schedule for meetings and discussions. But they were open to new participants selected by the salonnière herself. The salons and their hostesses played a very important role in shaping and formulating public opinion in France and the rest of Europe in the 18th c. It was an institution of instruction and pleasure and entertainment. By late 18th c., they were increasingly seen as frivolous and outdated. They were made the target of mockery and insult during the French Revolution, despite popularising certain ideas central to the revolutionaries- Liberty, Egalitarianism, Tolerance etc.

Leading Salonnières - Madame d'Épinay (d. 1789), M. du Deffand (d. 1780), M. du Dupin (d. 1769), M. Geoffrin (1777), Madame de Pompadour (d. 1764), Sophie de Condorcet (d. 1820).

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How to cite this article:

Bhavna Dahiya (2022) 'Women In Early Modern Europe', *International Journal of Current Advanced Research*, 11(04), pp. 631-633. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24327/ijcar.2022.633.0141>
