

UNGENDERING THUGGEE: A RELOOK AT THE FEMALE THUGS

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Abstract

Thuggee as a distinct class of criminal homicide has generated much interest ever since the British colonizers in India exposed it in the nineteenth century. While the male thugs were certainly more common, female practitioners of thuggee were not entirely unknown. Curiously, both colonial writers and contemporary researchers have conceptualized thuggee as an all-male activity, thereby consigning the female thugs to oblivion. By bringing the focus back on the female thugs, this paper questions the gendering of thuggee. It also shows how the acknowledgement of the existence of the female thugs destabilizes both colonial constructions of thuggee and contemporary understandings of the subject.

Keywords: *Thuggee, Gendering, Female Thugs, Colonial Construction, Thévenot, Sleeman.*

Motto: “No movement is complete without the presence of women, and, a hundred years ago, Thuggee proved no exception to this rule.” Captain James Lewis Sleeman (Sleeman, 2007: 108)

1. Introduction

As a peculiar ‘Oriental’ crime, *thuggee* has never ceased attracting attention ever since its ‘discovery’ in nineteenth century India by the colonizing British. According to Darren Reid, the five remarkable characteristics of *thuggee* are “strangulation, secrecy, organization, antiquity, and religiosity” (2017: n.p.). Colonial accounts sensationalized *thuggee* as an ancient evil that was a synthesis of highway robbery and murderous cult. Its mostly hereditary practitioners, who were efficiently organized in gangs, earned their living by befriending, deceiving, murdering and robbing travellers on the road whom they offered up as sacrifices to their patroness, the Hindu Goddess Kali. Described as remorseless predators who never spared their quarries, the thugs were believed to specialize in dispatching their victims through strangulation². They were accused of murdering thousands of

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² Hence the British used the word “Strangler” interchangeably with “Thug”. The thugs were also called *phansigars* in India, meaning people who killed with a *phansi* (noose). However, they were known to use other weapons like swords and poisons occasionally.

people annually, whom they discreetly buried in order to avoid detection. The discovery and eradication of *thuggee* was hailed as one of the crowning achievements of the colonial government in India. Given that the British caught and convicted thousands of thugs, one may infer that a lot of people followed this profession. Major Sleeman records that 1562 thugs were tried between 1826 and 1835 (1836: 38 – 39), while Meadows Taylor reports that 3263 thugs were arraigned between 1831 and 1837 (1858: vi). Several thugs must have also evaded capture, as the authorities themselves recognized (Taylor, 1858: vi). While the majority of thugs were admittedly men, female practitioners of *thuggee* were not entirely unheard of. Curiously, both colonial writers and contemporary scholars tend to forget the latter fact, thereby consigning female thugs to oblivion. As a result, *thuggee* has been erroneously conceptualized in our times as a gendered occupation in which women were denied admittance. Even the historian Mike Dash believes that “[t]huggee was an almost exclusively male profession” (2006: 310). Though he does acknowledge that “a handful of references to women” working in Thug gangs exist, he pays no attention to these. Captain Sleeman³ also asserts that “[f]emale Thugs were not common” (2007: 108). Other scholars studying *thuggee* such as Martin Van Woerkens, Kim A Wagner, Parama Roy, Amal Chatterjee, Máire ní Fhlathúin and others have either totally ignored the female thugs or have merely acknowledged their existence in passing. There is a paucity of scholarly writings on female thugs which points to a lacuna in existing knowledge.

In this paper I re-engage with a problem which I had partially identified in an earlier work. In my article “The Daughters of Kali and their ‘Untold Story’”, I had examined two pioneering colonial novels on *thuggee* - Meadows Taylor’s *Confessions of a Thug* and John Masters’ *The Deceivers* - and had sought to answer why these works did not depict any female thug. I had argued that casting women in the role of villains rather than victims would have jeopardized the ‘colonial rescue script’ which formed the very backbones of these novels. I had also suggested there that the recognition of the existence of female thugs would have forced the colonial authors to conceptualise *thuggee* in a significantly different way (Chakraborty, 2018: 47 – 60). Looking beyond fictional representations, this paper contemplates on the gendering of *thuggee* in colonial and contemporary discourses. By demonstrating that the colonial crusaders against *thuggee* themselves recognized the existence of female thugs, this paper questions the stereotyping of *thuggee* as an all-male profession. It is contended that the recognition of the existence of female thugs not only problematizes colonial construction of *thuggee* but also calls into question some of the contemporary ideas on the subject.

³ Captain James Lewis Sleeman is the grandson of Major Sir William Henry Sleeman who spearheaded British campaign against *thuggee*.

2. The Female Thugs in Colonial Writings: A Survey of Existing Literature

In this section, existing literature on *thuggee* has been surveyed in order to point out all references to female thugs in colonial writings. One must acknowledge at the very beginning that it is impossible to prove the existence of female thugs from extratextual sources, as no such source exists. In fact, our knowledge of *thuggee* itself is derived from textual sources which were almost entirely the creations of the British colonizers.⁴ The Indians may have known about *thuggee*, but they did not document it as the British did.⁵ The thugs did not write about themselves. Wagner points out that “[t]hey did not have any religious texts, iconography or artefacts that related specifically to thuggee and which would allow us to examine their practices independently” (2014: 17). It is indeed true that the British created their ‘*thuggee* archive’ from the depositions and confessions of the thug approvers⁶. But as these approvers always confessed under duress, their testimonies remain open to suspicion.⁷ Evading severe punishment being their ultimate aim, they could be induced to confess anything and everything that the British authorities wanted or expected to hear (Wagner, 2014: 19). There is thus the suspicion, expressed so wonderfully by M. J. Carter in her recent historical thriller *The Strangler Vine*, that *thuggee* was nothing but a construction – a colonial phantasmagoria conjured up through the collaboration of the British and the so called ‘thugs’ (Carter, 2014). *Thuggee*, in this view, was nefariously ‘invented’ by the colonizers to justify, maintain and consolidate their paramountcy in India. First suggested by scholars like Parama Roy, Amal Chatterjee, Maire ni Fhlathúin, and Mary Poovey, this theory has been recently challenged⁸ (see Roy, 1996: 130, 132; Chatterjee, 1998: 5, 125 - 141; Fhlathúin, 2001: 42; and Poovey, 2004: 10 - 11). But the truth remains that it is almost impossible to prove the existence of *thuggee* and the thugs from any source outside the colonial *thuggee* archive.

What augments our difficulties when it comes to female thugs is the total silence of the pre-colonial indigenous sources on the subject. Wagner has identified several medieval Indian works mentioning *thuggee* or the thugs. These include Ziauddin

⁴ The word ‘text’ is used here in its broadest sense to include official reports and despatches on *thuggee*.

⁵ The British claimed that even the Indians did not know about *thuggee*, which was certainly not the case.

⁶ The approvers were convicted thugs who testified against their own comrades for mitigation of their sentences. They were like the King’s Witnesses.

⁷ Parama Roy draws our attention to the difference between ‘confessions’ and ‘testimonies’. While a confession “dilutes” the guilt of the confessor, the approver’s testimonies, in order to be credible, needed to “implicate its speaker as fully as possible in the illegality being described” (Roy, 1996: 135).

⁸ Dash, Wagner and Reid believe that *thuggee* was not simply a colonial construction.

Barani's (1285 – 1357) chronicle *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi*, poems by the devotional poets Surdas (ca. 1478 – 1584) and Kabir (ca. 1440 - 1518), the devotional *Janamsakhi* texts of Sikhism, and the 1672 *farman* or decree of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (Wagner, 2014: 27 – 34; also, Wagner, 2009: 58 - 60). None of these sources mention female thugs. In the absence of any indigenous document relating to female thugs, it becomes difficult to determine whether they at all existed in reality or were mere colonial construction. Moreover, it is to be kept in mind that the vernacular word *thag*, from which the English *thug* has been derived, is applicable to both men and women in its general sense of deceiver, swindler or trickster. *Thag* does not necessarily indicate a criminal disposition, as any harmless prankster can be a *thag* as well. This means that even if any woman is called a *thag* in any Indian text, it would be difficult to determine from this appellation alone whether she is implied to be a strangler by profession or just any ordinary swindler.

The earliest and only pre-colonial reference to female thugs appears in the seventeenth century French traveller Jean de Thévenot's travelogue, which was translated into English in 1687 as *The Travels of M. de Thévenot into the Levant*.⁹ He writes:

They [the Thugs] have another cunning trick also to catch Travellers with: They (sic) send out a handsome Woman upon the road, who with her Hair dishevelled, seems to be all in Tears, sighing and complaining of some misfortune which she pretends has befallen her: Now as she takes the same way that the Traveller goes, he easily falls into Conversation with her, and finding her beautiful, offers her his assistance, which she accepts; but he hath no sooner taken her up behind him on his Horse-back, but she throws the snare about his Neck and strangles him, or at least stuns him, until the Robbers (who lie hid) come running to her assistance and compleat (sic) what she hath begun (Thévenot in Wagner, 2009: 61 – 62).

Contemporary scholars believe that here Thévenot is merely reporting a hearsay (Wagner, 2014: 29). But his account was much credited in the early nineteenth century. Dr Richard C. Sherwood, who penned the first scholarly exposition on *thuggee*, cites the above-mentioned passage in his work¹⁰ (1820: 277). Rev. Hobart Caunter also draws upon Thévenot's account in his 1836 volume of *The Oriental Annual* (1836: 133). Another nineteenth century writer James Arthur Robert Stevenson is guilty of plagiarizing Thévenot's passage in his article "Some

⁹ Its original title in French was *Voyages de Mr De Thévenot contenant la relation de l'Indostan, des nouveaux Mongols & des autres Peuples & Pays des Indes*. It was published in 1684.

¹⁰ Sherwood's article "Of the Murderers Called Phansigars" was published in the journal *Madras Literary Gazette* in 1816. It was republished later in the thirteenth volume of the *Asiatick Researches* in 1820. A slightly abridged and annotated version with modernized spellings was appended to Sleeman's *Ramaseeana*. The citations here are from the 1820 version.

Account of the P'hansigárs, or Gang-robbers, and of the Shúðgarshids, or Tribe of Jugglers" (1834). He, however, adds an extra erotic angle to it, stating, "[t]he girl sometimes excites his passions, and having seduced him into a favourable spot, herself fastens the fatal noose, her companion being always near enough to afford timely aid" (Stevenson, 1834: 281). One may find that this risqué detail never appears in any other colonial document; although Sherwood does suggest something close to it when he mentions that "[t]ravellers in the South of India also are sometimes decoyed through the allurements of women into situations, where they are murdered ..."¹¹ (1820: 277). However, since Stevenson does not mention his source/s, it is not clear whether he was merely elaborating upon Sherwood's account or whether he came to know about this from some thug informants.

In his magnum opus *Ramaseeana* (1836), Sir William Henry Sleeman briefly acknowledges the existence of female thugs. Sleeman's testimony carries weight as he was the officer who masterminded British campaign against *thuggee* in colonial India. In *Ramaseeana*, one finds the argot term¹² *Baroonee* which was used by the thugs to mean "an old and venerable Thug woman, who is much respected by the fraternity" (Sleeman, 1836: 79). Sleeman adds in a note that he had heard about only two female thugs. One of them was the wife of the thug-leader Bukhtawur of Jeypore (Jaipur). Famous for her daring, this female thug regularly accompanied her husband in thug expeditions. On one occasion, she was reported to have strangled a man all by herself when the latter had overpowered her husband. Sleeman also mentions hearing about another Deccani woman who "kept herself a small gang of Thugs" (1836: 79 – 80). Several pages later, he cites the deposition of the male thug Myan Khan who talks about a female thug-leader or *jemadarnee* from Karnataka named Jugdumah. This quinquagenarian female thug-leader was reported to have controlled a band of some two hundred thugs (Sleeman, 1836: 259 – 260). It is not clear whether Jugdumah and the Deccani woman mentioned earlier in the book are the one and the same character. Even if this is so, *Ramaseeana* refers to at least two female thugs, keeping open the possibility of the existence of others like them.

The best source of information on female thugs would doubtlessly be the unpublished official documents preserved in British and Indian archives. Unfortunately, no scholar till now has thoroughly exhausted all these archives to find out everything about the female thugs. My own research at the National Archives of India, New Delhi, did not yield much at this stage. I did find an interesting letter from Captain James Paton, the Assistant Resident at Lucknow, to Sir W. H. Sleeman. Paton, who was in charge of the thug prison at Lucknow, describes his plans for dealing with the wives and children of the thug approvers

¹¹ Sherwood was unsure whether the thugs applied this particular method or some other criminal group did.

¹² The British believed that the thugs used a secret language called *Ramasi* for communication. Modern scholars unanimously agree that this was not a "language", but a collection of argots.

who resided with them.¹³ As *thuggee* was considered to be a largely hereditary occupation, Paton's aim was to prevent the children of the approvers from taking up their 'ancestral' profession. To achieve this, he wanted to separate the children from their parents during their infancy. While the boys were to be trained in some "useful" profession, the girls were to be imparted religious education to convert "these young female Thugs" to "useful housewives"¹⁴ (Paton, 1838)¹⁵. By calling these girls "young female Thugs", was Paton suggesting that even these girl children had the potentiality of becoming thugs on reaching maturity? Paton does not elaborate further. But such an understanding may not be wholly improper given that the British made much of the hereditary nature of *thuggee*.

While women operating in ordinary thug gangs may not have been numerous, the case is different with the *Megpunna* thugs. The British saw *Megpunnaism* as an offshoot of *thuggee*, though Bruce, and Dash after him, believes that it was an altogether different sort of crime (Bruce, 1968: 163 – 164; Dash, 2006: 250 -251). Simens, the Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, informs Sleeman in a letter that the Governor General did not consider *Megpunnaism* as a separate species of crime, believing it to differ from ordinary *thuggee* only "in the species of gain" (Simens, 1839). Sleeman defines *Megpunnaism* as the "system of murdering indigent and helpless parents for the sake of their children" (1839: 4). The children were either sold to gypsies and brothels or to affluent families. The *Megpunnas* followed almost the same *modus operandi* as the thugs. Where they differed was that they used female inveiglers to win the confidence of the indigent families. The female *Megpunnas* were also employed to take charge of the children after their parents' murder. Records suggest that a good many women served in *Megpunna* gangs. The *Megpunna* thug leader Gurreeb Dass alias Gurreeba discloses that his gang consisted of "fifteen or twenty men and women" (Dass, 1838). Another thug leader, Balluck Dass, mentions that both men and women in *Megpunna* gangs received equal shares of money (Dass, 1838). Sleeman himself interrogated a number of female *Megpunna* thugs. One of them, Moosmt, alias Umree alias Khumba, was a thug leader or a *jemadarnee* who, with her husband, led "a gang of forty or fifty men and women" (Sleeman, 1839: 20). Other female *Megpunnas* interrogated by Sleeman include Radha, Rookmune, and Oodakoor (Sleeman, 1839: 21 - 24). Interestingly, none of these female *Megpunnas* admitted killing the

¹³ The approvers were allowed to live with their families in thug prisons. This was not mere benevolence, but a precautionary measure intended to prevent jailbreaks. See the second paragraph of Paton's letter to Sleeman.

¹⁴ Interestingly, while the sons of thugs were discouraged from marrying and reproducing, the daughters were expected to become housewives! Roy's comment appears significant, "a female thug was a rarity, and was, presumably, a less potent conduit of the genetic material of hereditary criminality than males were" (Roy, 1996: 136).

¹⁵ The unpublished official despatches and reports of the Thagi and Dakiti Department carried no page numbers in their originals. Hence page numbers cannot be provided for any of these documents.

victims with their own hands. Instead, both male and female *Megpunnas* insisted that the women were only employed to look after the children of the victims.¹⁶ As I have already argued elsewhere, this claim might have stemmed from the necessity of escaping punishment and, therefore, must be taken with a pinch of salt (Chakraborty, 2018: 52 – 53).

An eyewitness' description of a female thug has been provided by John Lang in his memoir *Wanderings in India*¹⁷ (1859). Lang describes meeting a young attractive female thug in a thug prison at Monghyr who admitted strangling as many as twenty-one women. At the author's request, she demonstrated the method of killing with a noose (Lang, 2015: 103). Such an encounter might not have been unusual, as thug prisoners were often made to "restage their former deeds to thrill occasional Western tourists" (Wagner, 2007: 228). But this woman's claim of strangling twenty one women all by herself appear rather singular, because apprehended female thugs generally denied taking part in the actual murders. Rather, they insisted that they were only employed as inveiglers (see Sleeman's interrogation of the female *Megpunnas*, Sleeman, 1839: 20 - 23). Was this woman then speaking the truth about her profession or was she just pretending to be a thug to impress Lang and pocket a few extra coins?¹⁸ It may be noted that being a private barrister by profession, Lang was in no way connected with the British campaign against *thuggee*. Not being an expert, he was not in the position to correctly judge the validity of the woman's claim.

Lang also refers to another female thug in his short sketch "Wedding Bells" published in *Household Words* on 19 February 1853. This work describes the murder of a young bride by a very old female thug. Though Lang mentions that this female thug was later captured with her whole gang in Bolundshuhur (Bulandshahr in Uttar Pradesh), he does not name her (1853: 552). Consequently, a confirmation of this account from any other source becomes practically impossible.

From our survey of existing literature, it thus becomes clear that for many British colonial writers female thugs existed in reality. The stereotyping of *thuggee* as an all-male profession therefore appears surprising. In the subsequent sections, I reflect on what I call the gendering of *thuggee* in colonial and contemporary

¹⁶ This was not true. In her deposition, Birkee, a victim, claims that the female thug Hunsooree actively assisted the men in murdering her mother (Sleeman, 1839: 31).

¹⁷ Originally published in the *Household Words* on Saturday, 14 November 1857.

¹⁸ Fhlathúin more or less adopted a similar line of reasoning when she suggested that the families of the male thugs may have found it "expedient to create their own parts in these performances" (2016, 37). She, however, mistakenly argues that Lang deviates from the standard accounts of the Thuggee and Dacoity department, which mention only one female thug "as an extraordinary exception" (2016, 37). As pointed out in this article, Sleeman actually wrote about two different female thugs. He also accepted the possibility of the existence of several other female thugs in his writings.

discourses. I also demonstrate how the consideration of female thugs problematizes both colonial and contemporary discourses on *thuggee*.

3 Gendering Thuggee

One needs to note at the outset that while the stereotyping of *thuggee* as an exclusively male profession was a feature of twentieth century discourses on *thuggee*, its actual roots lay in the nineteenth century. It is Sleeman who primarily appears responsible for the gendering of *thuggee*. All the authors writing before Sleeman like Sherwood, Stevenson and Caunter did not doubt Thévenot's account of the female thugs. Sherwood indeed writes that women did not accompany large gangs of thugs but concedes that the smaller "and more needy parties" probably employed them (1820: 278). Sleeman, however, repudiates Thévenot's account in one of his notes in *Ramaseeana*.¹⁹ He believes that while female thugs may have existed in Thévenot's time in the seventeenth century, they no longer remained in the nineteenth. He writes that "the Thugs who reside in fixed habitations and intermarry with other people, never allow their women to accompany them or take any part in their murders" (Sleeman, 1836: 359). Given that he mentioned Jugdumah and Bukhtawur's wife in *Ramaseeana*, this assertion appears self-contradictory. Sleeman would be later forced to revise his opinion with the discovery of *Megpunnaism*. But as the seminal text on *thuggee*, *Ramaseeana*'s influence on later commentators became decisive.

To the question what made Sleeman contradict the existence of female thugs in *Ramaseeana*, it is difficult to provide a straightforward answer. Probably he had no ulterior motive behind this. After all, he mentioned Bukhtawur's wife, though he considered her an exception at this point (Sleeman, 1836: 359). He went on to report about the female *Megpunna* thugs. He even acknowledged the existence of female members in gangs of professional poisoners called the *dhatūra*-thugs in his *Rambles and Recollections* (Sleeman, 1844: 110 – 114). It seems then that Sleeman did not deny the existence of female thugs on purpose. In my opinion, it was the male thug approvers, rather than the colonial officers, who stereotyped *thuggee* as an all-male profession. Very few of them acknowledged women's involvement in *thuggee*. Some actually denied it. Since Sleeman got his information mostly from the thugs themselves, unlike Thévenot who must have got his from the ordinary Indians, it is possible that he was deliberately misinformed by his sources. For various reasons, the male approvers may have felt it necessary to conceal the truth about their female associates. One, probably, was their pursuit for legitimacy and respectability. Both Dash and Wagner recognize that the thugs generally tried to present their profession as a martial calling (Dash, 2006: 160; Wagner, 2014: 151 -

¹⁹ Fhlathúin has shown that most writers writing after Sleeman, like Trevelyan and Kaye, have followed him in dismissing Thévenot's statement about the use of 'female decoys' by the thugs (2001: 38 – 39).

153). Wagner believes that they did this to “recast *thuggee* as a ritually legitimate and socially sanctioned livelihood” (2009: 7). He further recognizes that in doing so “they provided the British with the substance for the construction of the colonial stereotype[s]” (Wagner, 2014: 238). The acknowledgement that the thugs depended on *women* to seduce their male victims would have deflated their pretence to martial valour.²⁰ In pre-modern India, the patriarchal martial code of honour demanded that men should be pitted against men in a combat of equals. Striking at a man from behind a woman would have been considered cowardly. Thus whatever their actual *modus operandi* might have been, the apprehended thugs would naturally have felt inclined to gloss over women’s involvement in *thuggee*. Even the *Megpunnas* insisted that the female members were employed to win the confidence of only *women* travellers (Sleeman, 1839: 18). The male thugs’ desire to shield their womenfolk may have also induced them to conceal the existence of the women thugs from the British. However, this consideration certainly did not deter the *Megpunnas* from testifying against their females. Here it is necessary to recognize that unlike the female thugs who left few survivors to testify against them, it was easy to implicate the female *Megpunna* thugs from the testimonies of the victims’ children. Unlike the ordinary thugs, the *Megpunnas* thus had no way of denying their women’s involvement in crime.

Another factor might have caused the gendering of *thuggee*. The practice of employing women as deceivers and stranglers might have been local or regional but not universal. Sleeman himself felt that unlike the thugs who resided in villages, nomadic thugs must have been assisted by their women in thug expeditions²¹ (1836: 360). However, at that period the British were bent upon presenting *thuggee* as a pan-Indian conspiracy. This justified the extension of their jurisdiction over yet unoccupied parts of the subcontinent.²² Eager to represent *thuggee* as a pan-Indian crime, Sleeman himself may have glossed over all local variations in practice, including the employment of women in some thug gangs.

Besides Sleeman, the other colonial author responsible for stereotyping *thuggee* as a male profession is Captain Philip Meadows Taylor. Rightfully described as “the publicist” for *thuggee* by Chatterjee (1999: 126), his bestselling novel *Confessions of a Thug* (1839) introduced the thugs to the ordinary Victorian reading public. However, Taylor pointedly denies the existence of female thugs in this work. The novel does not depict any female thug. More importantly, the thug protagonist Ameer Ali is shown to laugh inwardly with derision on hearing a merchant mention the female thugs, suggesting that they did not exist (Taylor, 1858: 145; see also, Fhlathúin, 2001: 37). As I have already pointed out in my previous article

²⁰ I derive this idea from Wagner, who believes that the thugs aspired to the Kshatriya (warrior) status.

²¹ He thus makes a clear distinction between nomadic and settled thugs.

²² Fhlathúin and others suggest that *thuggee* allowed the British the opportunity to extend their jurisdiction over larger tracts of the country (Fhlathúin, 2001: 32).

“The Daughters of Kali and their ‘Untold Story’”, Taylor’s novel is based on the ‘rescue script’ where ‘white men save brown women from brown men’ (for explanation of ‘rescue script’ see Spivak; Spivak, 1988: 93). It would thus have been difficult for him to present women in the role of victimizers instead of victims. Whatever the case is, Taylor’s responsibility behind the gendering of *thuggee* appears greater, as he, to cite Wagner, “made the thugs known to a much wider audience through his novel” (2014: 12).

In the twentieth century, only James Sleeman devoted an entire chapter of his book to female thugs.²³ Other commentators paid little attention to them. However, some did acknowledge their existence in passing. For instance, Walter Elmer Sikes wrote in 1937 that “there are instances of where women sometimes assisted them in their work” (1937: 308). On the other hand John Masters denies the existence of female thugs in his novel *The Deceivers* (1952), making a thug character declare that “[t]he women can’t actually be Deceivers of course ...” (2014: n.p.). Contemporary works on the subject also manifest an indifference towards female thugs. Martine Van Woerkens recognizes the existence of female thugs, but believes that they were not common (2002: 145 - 146). Dash expresses the same view. Wagner does not focus on female thugs. Only Maire ni Fhlathúin pays some attention to them. But this she does solely in order to point out the discrepancies in European accounts of *thuggee*, particularly the difference between Thévenot and the later writers (Fhlathúin, 2001: 31 – 42). It appears that contemporary scholars are too engaged in proving or disproving the existence of *thuggee* to pay any separate attention to female thugs. The common belief prevails that *thuggee* was a gendered occupation; an “all-male system of banditry”, as Rasheda Parveen and Akshaya K. Rath call it in their 2018 article (2018: 167). Literary and cinematic representations of *thuggee* have never featured any female thug till now, thereby consolidating the understanding of *thuggee* as an all-male profession.

4. Conclusions

The female thugs provide an interesting field of investigation to researchers studying East-West encounter and its effect on gendering and identity formation. As I understand, the gendering of *thuggee* was the product of the collaboration between the colonizing British and the colonized Indian patriarchy. However, instead of putting the entire burden for this gendering on patriarchal domination of women, I discern other forces like dominance and resistance at work. In trying to legitimise their activity as a martial profession, the thugs were in effect contradicting British perception of them as criminals. Thus when they were stereotyping *thuggee* as a male profession, they were not actually trying to exclude women from it but instead attempting to enhance their own prestige in British eyes.

²³ Sleeman’s account, derived from his grandfather’s writings, adds nothing new to existing knowledge.

On the British side, the gendering of *thuggee* occurred not from a need to dominate women but from the necessity of arriving at a stable definition of *thuggee* that admitted no variations. It is to be noted that the gendering of *thuggee* was discursive rather than actual. Women continued working in thug gangs even after, as evidence shows.

The debate over the existence of female thugs unsettles the assumption of modern scholars such as Roy who believe that the 'self-referential' texts that constitute the British *thuggee* archive manifest "very little significant difference" (1996: 122). Even if we accept that *thuggee* is a British invention, its construction by the colonial authorities seems to have been unplanned and haphazard. The differences existing among colonial texts on the matter of female thugs amply prove this point. The gendering of *thuggee* shows that identity formation in the colonial era was dynamic. Moreover, identity formation was not the sole prerogative of the dominant class but resulted from the communication between the ruler and the ruled. Thus the idea of the existence of a homogenised colonial discourse on *thuggee* becomes problematized through this study.

It is necessary to admit that our study opens up more questions than can be answered at present. Contemporary scholarship on *thuggee*, as Fhlathúin points out, tends to focus "on the local, political and social contexts for criminal activity in nineteenth century India, rather than accepting an apocryphal tradition" (2001: 42). In this scenario, it would have been interesting to investigate the local and social contexts that induced Indian women to take up *thuggee* as profession. Such a study would surely have given us new insights into gender relations and gender construction vis-à-vis organized crime in nineteenth century India. However, the data available to me at this stage does not permit the undertaking of such a study. In drawing attention back to female thugs, my purpose in this paper has been simply to highlight a new field of research. The final unravelling and ungendering of *thuggee* must await further and more elaborate investigation.

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