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The Bluestocking Salons of Eighteenth-Century Britain

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I enjoyed reading my teacher and mentor Fakrul Alam's "The Literary Club of 18th-Century London" *(Daily Star,* 20 August 2018). Referring to our age-old practice of having literary *addas* (chatting circles) and London's "The Club" better known as "Literary Club" which Samuel Johnson (1709-84) and Joshua Reynolds (1723-92) founded in 1764, he pointed to a comparable literary tradition of Bengal and Britain.

It is believed that Johnson was inspired by Francis Bacon's precept that "reading makes a full man, conversation a ready man, and writing an exact man" and used to devote "most attention to how to communicate useful and pleasurable knowledge successfully." So mainly because of Johnson's witticisms, sense of humour and the entertaining conversations of the Club, it received wide coverage in the national and international media of the time. Johnson's and Reynolds' Club attracted other great writers such as Adam Smith (1723-90), Oliver Goldsmith (1728-74), Edward Gibbon (1737-94) and James Boswell (1740-95). However, the fact remains that it was an all-male circle of interlocutors.

The title of Professor Alam's essay stirred in me an anticipation that it would touch on the eighteenth-century bluestocking circles which were perhaps equally vibrant. It did not do so, to which I drew his attention. This essay represents my attempt to act upon his adesh (compelling advice) to "write about [bluestocking]" and thus to complement his piece by offering some insight into eighteenth-century Britain's bluestocking salons.

Bluestocking circles were led and hosted by women – such as, Elizabeth Vesey (1715-91), Elizabeth Montagu (1718-1800) and Frances Boscawen (1719-1805) – in the 1750s and "continued well into the 1780s with a second generation of hostesses and societies in London

and the provinces" which included Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97). Such salons brought together both women and men. In some circles, Johnson was a regular attendee. Importantly, the name 'bluestocking' is associated with the erudite and witty Benjamin Stillingfleet (1702–71).

Bluestocking circles were exclusive and most participants, affluent and well educated. Initially, they were required to wear formal dress which included black silk stockings. However, Stillingfleet could not afford to buy the conventional black or white silk stockings, so Vesey allowed him to attend the gatherings in the everyday modest attire of blue worsted stockings, normally the garb of working men.

This was because Stillingfleet became an integral and indispensable member of the circles, as he was very entertaining, fun to listen to and went down very well with the female participants. They were ready to delay their discussions until his arrival, stating: "We can do nothing without our bluestockings." Eventually, such feminist salons came to be known as bluestocking circles and became less formal as opposed to the formality symbolized by black stockings.

Women in eighteenth-century Britain had limited access to the public sphere and were subject to multiple discriminations and exclusions. Defying social restrictions on their participation in the public realm, bluestocking women used the literary circles to sharpen their wits and interact with "other educated women and men".

Given the strong prejudice against women of intellectual ability and creative potential in eighteenth-century Europe, bluestocking literary gatherings involving women were considered unconventional and even deviant, and therefore viewed negatively by society. As a result, although denoting any learned or literary lady, the term bluestocking took on derogatory and stereotypical connotations and "women known as 'bluestockings' were generally regarded with suspicion."

Referring to this phenomenon, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain compares the patriarchal prejudice of Bengal and Britain, stating: "In every society there are men who are against female education. Men in England used to ridicule educated women and call them 'bluestocking' while Bengali women are denounced as novel addicted." In the same vein, in *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf said:

> It might still be well to sneer at 'blue stockings with an itch for scribbling,' but it could not be denied that they could put money in their purses. Thus, towards the end of the

> eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle class woman began to write.

While pre-eighteenth-century British women writers mingled among acquaintances in what Margaret Ezell terms "coterie circles", bluestocking women made one step ahead. They enjoyed a greater space and their gender-neutral gatherings placed them on a complementary equivalence with men in literary discussions. Emphasizing this aspect of bluestocking intellectual life, Bridget Hill, in *Eighteenth-century Women: An Anthology*, states that bluestocking women "not only insisted on their ability to converse on equal terms with men, but in their salons demonstrated such ability and received public recognition for their intellectual attainments and their conversational wit."

One reason why first-generation bluestocking women writers of eighteenth-century Britain remained in a marginal position and received comparatively less literary attention is their conservative outlook in political and sexual matters. As in "Bluestocking Feminism" Harriet Guest puts it:

> [T]hese women did not obviously or vociferously attempt to reform the condition or treatment of women. They spent much of their time socializing with men … who were also conservative. It is perhaps because of that character … that they did not become prominent as a result of the drive to unearth hidden ancestors and to meet the pre-feminist family of the past that energized so much feminist enquiry in the 1970s.

However, in recent literary studies, bluestocking women have re-emerged with some distinction. Through a feminist retrieval approach to past literature, they have been discovered and brought to academic attention and their intellectual contributions, recovered and recognized.

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