

Construction of Female Sexuality in Colonial India

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to analyse the alternate language of discourse constructed by Indian nationalists and reformers in order to reject the colonial claims of India's backwardness. The first section of the paper illustrates how British colonizers highlighted the social position of women in India along with some key pieces of art and literature, where women were represented as beings with sexual desires, as proof for the country's moral corruption. This aided in the ideological justification of colonial rule and pressured the colonized to change their traditional practices and become 'civilised'. The second section of the paper talks about how the Indian reformers responded to the criticisms raised by the colonial administrators and scholars by reforming some of its barbaric practices and constructing an alternate language of discourse. This alternate language was aimed at establishing India's moral superiority over the West. In this process various cultural elements were sanitized and made devoid of any sexual aspect. This led to the construction of an idealised image of a modern Indian woman or a 'bhadra mahila', who was desexualised and whose roles were limited to the inner domain of the household. The final section highlights how these constructions impact women in India today.

Keywords- Sexuality, Women, Colonial construction, Nationalist project

INTRODUCTION

"You are talking about man and woman as friends. Sorry, that doesn't have any place in our society. We have the best culture. In our culture, there is no place for a woman."

- Adv. M. L. Sharma, defence attorney for Nirbhaya rape case.

As strange as these words sound, this was the logic used by a man to defend the murderers of Jyoti Singh, a 23-year-old woman on a cold night of 16th December 2012. In India, the notion of an ideal modern Indian woman is used as a yardstick to measure every other woman in the world through space and time. Any woman who seems to deviate the set norms, invites trouble. But who and when constructed this notion of an ideal woman? What was the need for this construction? How does it impact women in our country? These are some of the broad questions I seek to answer through this paper. It would require us to visit some historical texts which would help us understand the changing constructions of womanhood and female sexuality.

Ashis Nandy in his seminal work titled '*The Intimate Enemy*' (1983) states that colonialism is not just a socio-political phenomenon but it is also a psychological state that is anchored to the earlier states of social consciousness in the minds of the colonized and the colonizers. He states that the main reason behind British rule in India for 200 years was not its military and technological prowess, rather it was their ability to colonise the minds of people in a way that was not very different from the traditional forms of social hierarchies pre-existing in India. It pressures the colonized societies into altering their cultural priorities once and for all, tries to 'civilise' them and in this process, justifies and legitimizes its authority over the dominated. However, the colonized are not always passive recipients or simple-hearted victims in this process, rather they collectively fight against this mental oppression while modernizing itself and in this way, the modern Indian nation as we know comes into being. The colonized Indians reject the orientalist notions and try to create their alternative language of discourse which becomes their anticolonial movement.

WHITE MAN'S BURDEN

A central tool in the ideological justification of colonial rule was highlighting the backward and oppressive customs of the colonised people, that were sanctioned and legitimized by the scriptures. Apart from establishing a bureaucratic form of state functioning, the British administrators also sought to civilize their people and rid them of these retrogressive practices. In the process of establishing its supremacy, gender became an important means of marking the difference between oriental and the occident.

Within the long list of barbaric practices conducted by Indians, they identified atrocities perpetrated against women by all classes of men which were rationalized within the frameworks of religious doctrines. They sympathised with the maltreated women of India and marked that as evidence of the "unfree and oppressive nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country" (Chatterjee 1993, pg. 118). The social position of women became a marker of India's backwardness.

In his influential work titled '*The History of British India*', James Mill uses the writings of Millar and others to state that the position of women in India reflected the degree of civilization that its people had attained.

"among rude people, the women are generally degraded; among civilized people they are exalted." By this test, India ranked low on the civilizational scale, for "a state of dependence more strict and humiliating than that which is ordained for the weaker sex among the Hindus cannot easily be conceived" (Mill 1990 pg. 280, cited in Seth, 2013, pg. 274)

In yet another infamous book titled '*Mother India*' published in 1927 by U.S. Journalist Katherine Mayo, one can see a staunch critique of the gruesome practices that Indian women were subjected to and how they were used as nationalist icons in the anticolonial movement. (Sinha, 2000)

Not just outsiders but Indians who formed part of the new elite, those who were educated in the knowledge of the colonizer also criticised Indian practices and claimed that the status of women was indeed low in India. This is noted in the works of Reverend K. M. Banerjea, an Indian convert to Christianity who wrote that Bengali women "*drag on lives of the utmost wretchedness and degradation, and are regarded only as servants of the household, and ministers of carnal gratification to their husbands*" (Banerjea 1841, 41-42 cited in Seth, 2013 pg. 276).

INDIAN RESPONSE TO THE CLAIMS OF BACKWARDNESS

This set a political discourse in motion whereby many reformers and nationalists wanted to change the condition of its women to challenge the 'backward' status of India. And thus began the quest for independent nationhood and modernity which was deeply entwined with the "woman question" (Ibid, pg. 275)

How Indian nationalists tackled this issue is of utmost importance. Chatterjee (1993) claims that nationalism divides the domain of culture into 2 realms- the material and the spiritual. There was not much debate about India's backwardness as compared to the West in its materialistic aspects. In fact, it was commonly understood that to overcome the domination, the colonized people would have to learn the superior technologies of the advanced world and incorporate them within their own culture. This was their attempt at rationalising and reforming the traditional practices of their people. However, this could not mean a blind imitation of the West in every aspect because that would diminish any difference between us and them and by extension, threaten our self-identity of national culture.

The superiority of the East over the West in the spiritual arena was widely known and accepted and hence, to imitate the west in the spiritual realm too would be to adopt a lesser evolved culture. The materialist/spiritual dichotomy was also linked to the outer/inner distinction. The external world was the domain of the material, while the inner domain is the spiritual self. The former is crude, exploitative and requires practical considerations and hence, predominantly a domain occupied by men. The inner sphere or the home is detached from profane activities of everyday life, it is pure and women represent this realm. One sees how social roles get divided according to gender and space.

In this way, women came to represent the home, the inner domain and by extension, the spiritual realm. Preserving the sanctity of the spiritual realm and keeping it untouched by colonial influence was of utmost importance. One must not view this stubbornness as a refusal to modernize oneself rather it was an "*attempt to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project*" (Chatterjee, 1993, pg. 121).

By the late 19th and early 20th Century, the family was portrayed as the natural home of religion and self-sacrificing mothers and wives were exalted and glorified. They were seen as the refuge of an assaulted community identity (Gupta, 2001). Attempts were made to portray Indian women as very 'different' and 'morally superior' to western women by overemphasising the sacrificial and caring nature of Indian women. One such example was Mehboob Khan's cinematic response to Mayo's book by the same name '*Mother India*' released in the year 1957.

This is the story of Radha who works tirelessly in the fields to repay the loan that her family owes to the local moneylender. Left alone with her two sons, Radha is unable to save her family from utter starvation. In a helpless condition, she seeks the aid of the cunning moneylender who asks her to sleep with him in return for his help. In a moment of divine intervention, Radha is reminded of her dead husband and the commitment she made as a bride once. She refuses to compromise her integrity and this marks the iconic scene in the movie where she thrashes the 'other' with a lathi who attempts to outrage her modesty. *Mother India* becomes the symbol of sacrifice, devotion and love which is contrary to what Mayo portrayed in her book. (Sharma, 2021)

In this process, the identity of a "new" and modern woman was being constructed. Since education was a top priority for her, debates about the proper curriculum for women's education ensued. Using English as the medium of instruction was useless and detrimental to the psyche of the modern Indian woman as her central place was still at home and one could not risk her questioning the traditional social norms by being educated in the language of the liberal 'other'. This problem was solved by creating modern literature that was suitable for the womenfolk of new India which was accessible in their mother tongue alone. (Chatterjee, 1993, pg. 128). "*Women could now acquire modern education without jeopardizing her place at home and becoming a memsaheb*" (Ibid). She was different from the Western-educated women who acquired knowledge for the sake of economic interests and competed with men in the public domain. On the contrary, modern Indian women were not only educated but since they abided by their socially prescribed roles, they were more feminine and spiritual, and hence, better than their western counterparts and more liberated than their grandmothers or mothers.

Her femininity was marked by her "dressing habits, eating habits, social demeanour and religiosity" (Ibid). This construct of a modern Indian woman was to differentiate her from the memsaheb but it also played the role of differentiating her from women of the earlier generation and with women of lower classes.

Apart from the barbaric practices highlighted by British missionaries, ethnographers and administrators that Indian women were subjected to, they also used styles of clothing and pieces of art that according to them was 'too sexually explicit' as yet another reason why India was not as civilised as the West. India's sexual obsession was understood to be the cause of her moral corruption. Indian women were often compared to their western counterparts who always dressed modestly, were vigorous yet delicate and honoured themselves enough to resist the sexual advances of another man. These were values seemed to be lacking in Indian women who were often sexually objectified and easily accessible for the carnal gratification of Indian men.

William Crooke noted in a journal "*The Indian woman's bodice is in reality not covering at all. It rudely shelters the breasts and leaves the stomach exposed. But chiefly on account of its indecency it has been the subject of many praises in the compositions of authors and poets, who only think of love in its meanest form*" (Crooke, 1926, pg. 23, cited in Gupta, 2001, pg. 36).

This sexual degeneracy was believed to have invigorated with the coming of the Mughal era. Influential writers like Clarisse Bader associated the social decline of Indian women with the spread of erotic literature and the growth of the sensuous Vaishnav and Krishna cults. According to her, the country was further morally corrupted by the influence of Islam (Ibid).

To deal with this critique of Indian tradition, nationalist leaders and reformers attempted to sanitize Indian culture of all erotic aspects and break ties with all those cultural elements that were too sensuous.

One of the first such elements to come under fire was Hindi literature which contained instances of open eroticism and intense passion. Jayadeva's *Git Govinda*, composed in the 12th century is one such example. It celebrates the love of Radha and Krishna, who are often engaged in an "adulterous and incestuous relationship" (Ibid, pg. 42). In one section of his book, Sudhir Kakkar (1986 pg. 78) translates a part of the poem which talks about the longing that Radha feels for Krishna.

*My eyes close languidly as I feel The flesh quiver on his cheek, My body is moist with sweat;
he is Shaking from the wine of lust.*

Friend, bring Kesi's sublime tormentor to revel with me!

I've gone mad waiting for his fickle love to change.

At the end of their long-awaited sexual union, Radha tells Krishna,

Paint a leaf on my breasts! Put colour on my cheeks! Lay a girdle on my hips!

Twine my heavy braid with flowers! Fix rows of bangles on my hands And jewelled anklets on my feet!

Her yellow-robed lover Did what Radha said

One can see a bold Radha being portrayed in Jayadeva's work. But here came the paradox. How could Radha, a mother-goddess be seen as engaging in an illicit love affair with a man who was not her husband? How could she talk so brazenly about her desires? What image was this to portray to other women of the country? These problems were tackled by simply shifting the emphasis of Radha from an erotic and sexually active lover to that of a chaste and virtuous Hindu wife and mother. (Gupta, 2001, pg. 40). From a sexual partner, she becomes the greatest devotee of Lord Krishna. Their sexual union is translated into a divine union that is devoid of lust and eroticism. This transformation also played a role in altering gender imageries. Women were seen no more as "figures of eroticism, sexuality and playfulness" rather "calm and perfect figure in most of 'high' literature" (Ibid).

The next cultural aspect to be sanitized after literature was language, more specifically Braj Bhasha, which is a western dialect of Hindi. It was an important literary medium used during the 15th-19th century for writing poetry and is associated with Bhakti and Riti Kal. Since most erotic poetry was composed in Braj Bhasha, it wasn't seen as appropriate for usage in a modern civilised India. In its place, Khari Boli came to be the literary medium for the composition of poems and prose by the 1930s. Interestingly, Braj Bhasha was often associated with femininity, sweetness and eroticism while Khari Boli was masculine and was distinguished by reason. Since Braj bhasha was the dialect in which women were portrayed as sexual beings with carnal desires, perhaps one could also interpret its replacement with Khari Boli as the symbol of desexualising women and construction of new womanhood.

CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN

During the late 19th Century, numerous pieces of literature emerged which portrayed Indian women as childlike and free, who is never subjected to sexual objectification. Toru Dutt's *Savitri* for example describes a woman as,

"...Her charm was this- upon her face

Childlike and innocent and fair, No man with thought impure or base

Could ever look;- the glory there The sweet simplicity and grace, Abashed the boldest; but the good God's purity there loved to trace,

Mirrored in dawning womanhood... Her father let her have her way

In all things, whether high or low; He feared no harm; he knew no ill

Could touch a nature pure as snow..."

(cited in Tharu, 1999 pg. 259)

This poem associates a desexualised woman with a free woman, who cannot be touched by impure elements. A pure woman would excite no sexual response. If this is one side of the logic then the opposite would suggest that only a woman with sexual intent and desires attract sexual advances by men.

The problem behind this form of rationale is that it justifies victim/survivor blaming. As seen around us, women who are victims of sexual abuse are often blamed for dressing provocatively, going out late in the night and by extension “attracting” male attention. This is expressed most clearly in courtroom trials and in the arguments raised by defence attorneys whereby they question the character of the survivor. If they are found to have indulged in practices considered inappropriate for an ‘Indian woman’, the seriousness of her case is diluted, the victim is shamed for her past and in some occasions, the accused walk away scot-free or get a sentence of lesser degree.

A typical example of this can be the comments made by lawyer A. P. Singh who defended the murderers of 23-year-old Jyoti Singh. In a televised interview, he stated that if his daughter or sister engaged in premarital sexual relations that disgraced the family, he would take them to his farmhouse and in front of the entire family set them alight. (“Delhi Rapist Says”, 2015).

In yet another example, I present an excerpt from the interim order and judgment dated 13/9/2017 passed by the High Court of Punjab and Haryana at Chandigarh in Cr. M. NO. 23962 of 2017 in Cr. A. No. S-2396-SB of 2017 titled as “Vikas Garg v. State of Haryana”

...The testimony of the victim does offer an alternate story of casual relationship with her friends, acquaintances, adventurism and experimentation in sexual encounters and these factors would therefore, offer a compelling reasons to consider the prayer for suspension of sentence favourably particularly when the accused themselves are young and the narrative does not throw up gut wrenching violence, that normally precede or accompany such incidents... a careful examination of her statement again offers an alternate conclusion of misadventure stemming from a promiscuous attitude and a voyeuristic mind... The perverse streak in both is also revealed from her admission that a sex toy was suggested by Hardik [accused] and her acceptance of the same...”

CONCLUSION

This paper was an attempt to analyse the alternate language of discourse constructed by Indian nationalists and reformers in order to reject the colonial claims of India’s backwardness. In the process, one sees how the ‘woman question’ becomes a central element in the 19th century to measure India’s backwardness and hence a barrier to the achievement of modernity and by extension, national sovereignty. It became pertinent to address the oppressive social practices against women and to bring in reforms that elevated their status. However, Indian society had to ensure it did not overturn its patriarchal relations and thereby bring significant changes to its conjugal and gender relations. It achieved this by creating an alternative language of discourse. Neither did it resort to a blind imitation of the West nor did it defend and extol its oppressive traditions. On the contrary, India rejected the colonial claims to superiority and critiqued the modernity that it sought to bring. Its originality lay in its ability to fashion an inner identity where the difference and autonomy of the nation could be located. The responsibility of representing this inner sanctum, which was morally superior to the west, lay on the shoulders of Indian women. They were different from the orthodox Indian women, women from the lower class and castes, and also from the Westernized women. In this way, the modern notion of Indian womanhood, as we know it, came to be.

However, this notion has been highly criticized by feminist scholars and writers since the time of its construction. Women rejected these attempts at restricting their education, political say, access to knowledge and imposing a ban on their sexuality. To mention only two literary pieces of work that showed resistance towards these constructions, Rokeya Hossain’s utopian story *Sultana’s Dream* (1905) or Ismat Chughtai’s Urdu short story titled *Lihaaf* (1942) would make the point. A much-detailed analysis of women’s resistance and the reaction by conservatives could be a topic for another paper. For now, it suffices to say that through all the changes that India sought to bring to the status of its women, through all the permutations, combinations and shifts in nationalist thought, colonialism has been a central point of reference and a catalyst in the construction of an Indian woman and her sexual agency.

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