

## **Feminism, Post-Colonial Discourse and Indian Liminality**

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### **Abstract:**

*The ‘Women Question’ was a central issue in the most controversial debates over social reform in early and mid-nineteenth century Bengal-the period of so-called renaissance. What has perplexed historians is the rather sudden disappearance of such issues from the agenda of public debate towards the close of the century. From then onward, questions regarding the position of women in society did not arouse the same degree of public passion and acrimony as they had only a few decades before. An attempt has been made through this article to interpret this change.*

**Key Words:** women question, feminine/masculin dichotomy, *ghar/bahir*, *bhadramahila*

**The** ‘Women Question’ was a central issue in the most controversial debates over social reform in early and mid-nineteenth century Bengal-the period of so-called renaissance. Rammohan Roy’s historical fame is largely built around his campaign against the practice of the Immolation of Widows Vidyasagar’s around his efforts to legalize Widow Remarriage and abolish Kulin Polygamy, and the BrahmoSamaj was split twice in the 1870s over the question of marriage laws and the Age of Consent. What has perplexed historians is the rather sudden disappearance of such issues from the agenda of public debate towards the close of the century. From then onward, questions regarding the position of women in society did not arouse the same degree of public passion and acrimony as they had only a few decades before. The overwhelming issues became directly political ones-concerning the politics of nationalism.

How are we to interpret this change? GhulamMurshid<sup>2</sup> one of the researchers, states the problem in its most obvious, straight forward form. If one takes seriously, that is to say, in their liberal, rationalist, and egalitarian content, the mid- nineteenth century attempts in Bengal to “modernize” the condition of women, then what follows in the period of nationalism must be regarded as a clear retrogression<sup>3</sup>. ‘Modernization’ began in the first half of the 19th century because of the “penetration” of western ideas<sup>4</sup>. After some limited success, there was a perceptible decline in the reform movements as popular attitudes towards them hardened<sup>5</sup>. The new politics of nationalism glorified India’s past and tended to defend everything traditional<sup>6</sup>. All attempts of change customs and life styles began to be seen as the aping of western manners and thereby regarded with suspicion. Consequently, nationalism fostered a distinctly conservative attitude towards social beliefs and practices. The movement towards modernization was stalled by nationalist politics.

This critique of social implications of nationalism follows from rather simple and historicist assumptions. Murshid not only accepts that the early attempts at social reform were impelled

by the new nationalist and progressive ideas imported from Europe, he also presumes that the necessary historical culmination of such reforms in India ought to have been, as in the West, the full articulation of liberal values in social institutions practices<sup>7</sup>. From these assumptions, a critique of nationalist ideology and practices is inevitable. It would be the same sort of critique as that of the colonialist historian who argued that Indian nationalism was nothing but a scramble for sharing political power with the colonial rulers, it's mass following only the successful activation of traditional patron-client relationships, it's internal debates the squabbles of parochial factions, and its ideology a grab for xenophobia and exclusiveness<sup>8</sup>.

Clearly, the problem of the diminished importance of the women's question in the period of nationalism deserves a different answer from one given by Ghulam Murshid. Sumit Sarkar has argued that the limitations of nationalist ideology is pushing forward a campaign for liberal and egalitarian social change cannot be seen as a retrogression from an earlier radical reformist phase<sup>9</sup>. Those limitations were in fact present in the earlier phase, as well. The Renaissance reformers, he shows, were highly selective in their acceptance of liberal ideas from Europe<sup>10</sup>. Fundamental elements of social conservatism, such as the maintenance of caste distinctions and patriarchal forms of authority in the family, acceptance of the sanctity of the sastras, and preference for symbolic rather than substantive changes in social practices, were conspicuous in the reform movements of the early and mid-nineteenth century. All these selective types appear to have been induced by the assumption that culture and nationalism are integral<sup>11</sup>. (**Guha 1998, 242**)

## II

Following from this, one could ask, how did the reformers select what they wanted? What in other words, was the ideological sieve through which they put the newly imported ideas from Europe? If we can reconstruct this frame work of the nationalist ideology, we will be in a far better position to locate where exactly the women's question fitted in with the claims of nationalism.

In a recent critique (**Guha 1998, 242**) Partha Chatterjee argues that nationalism did in fact provide an answer to the new social and cultural problems concerning the position of women in modern society and that this answer was posited not on an identity but on a difference with the perceived forms of cultural modernity in the West. He also argues that the relative unimportance of the women's question in the last decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century is to be explained not by the fact that it had been censored out of the reform agenda or overtaken by the more pressing and emotive issues of political struggle. The reason lies in nationalism's success in situating the "women question" in an "inner" domain of sovereignty, far removed from the arena of political contest with the colonial state. (**Guha 1998, 242**) This "inner" domain of national culture was constituted in the light of the discovery of "tradition". For the sake of convenience Chatterjee has classified his construction in the following manner.

- a) Apart from the characterization of the political condition of India preceding the British conquest as a state of anarchy, lawlessness and arbitrary despotism, a central element in the ideological justification of British colonial rule was the criticism of the “degenerate and barbaric” social customs of the Indian people, sanctioned, or so it was believed, by the religious tradition. ( **Guha1998,242**). In identifying the tradition as “degenerate and barbaric, colonialist critics invariably repeated a long list of atrocities perpetrated on Indian women, not so much by men or certain classes of men, but by an entire body of scriptural canons and ritual practices that, they said by rationalizing such atrocities within a complete framework of religious doctrine, made them appear to be perpetrators and sufferers alike as the necessary marks of right conduct. By assuming a position of sympathy with the un-free and oppressed womanhood of India, the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian women into a sign of the inherently oppressive and un-free nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country. Indeed, the practical implication of the criticism of Indian tradition was necessarily a project of civilizing the Indian People : the entire edifice of colonialist discourse was fundamentally constituted around the project. ( **Guha1998,242**)

Of course, within the discourse thus constituted, there was much debate and controversy about the specific ways in which to carry out this project. The options ranged from proselytization by Christian missionaries to legislative and administrative action by the colonial state to a gradual spread of enlightened western knowledge underlying each option was the liberal colonial idea that in the end Indians themselves must come to believe in the unworthiness of their traditional customs and embrace the new form of civilized and rational social order. What one must note here is that the so-called women’s question in the agenda of Indian social reform in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was not about the specific condition of women within a specific set of social relations as it was about the political encounter between a colonial state and the supposed “tradition” of a conquered people. It was colonialist discourse that, by assuming the hegemony of Brahmanical religious texts and the complete submission of all Hindus to the dictates of texts, defined the tradition that was to be criticized and reformed.

- b) Partha Chatterjee has described the way nationalism separated the domain of culture into two spheres—the material and the spiritual. ( **Guha1998,243**) It was in the material sphere that the claims of western civilization were the most powerful. Science, technology, rational forms of economic organization, modern methods of statecraft—these had given the European countries the strength to subjugate the non-European people to impose their dominance over the whole world. To overcome this domination the colonized people had to learn those superior techniques of organizing material life and incorporate them within their cultures. This was one aspect of nationalist

project of rationalizing and reforming the traditional culture of their people. But this could not mean the imitation of the west in every aspect of life, for then the very distinctions between the west and the east would vanish, the self-identity of national culture would itself be threatened. In fact, as Indian Nationalists in late nineteenth century argued, not only was it undesirable to imitate the West in anything other than the material aspects of life, it was even unnecessary to do so, because in the spiritual domain the East was superior to the West. What was necessary was to cultivate the material techniques of modern western civilization while retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture.

The discourse of nationalism shows that the material/spiritual distinction was condensed into an analogous, but ideologically for more powerful dichotomy: that between the outer and the inner. ( Guha1998,244) The material domain, argued nationalists writers, lies outside us- a mere external, which influences us, conditions us, and to which we are forced to adjust. But ultimately it is unimportant. It is the spiritual, which lies within, that is our true self, it is that which is genuinely essential. This was the key that nationalism supplied for resolving the ticklish problems posed by issues of social reform in the 19th century.

Applying the inner/outer distinction to the matter of concrete day-to-day living separates the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the world. The world is the external, the domain of the material, the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world- and woman is its representation. And so one gets an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*.

Chatterjee seems to have been tempted to find continuities in these social attitudes in the phase of social reform in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. So he has labeled this, as indeed the liberal historiography of India has done, as conservatism inner defense of traditional norms ( Guha1998,246). But this would be a mistake. The material/spiritual dichotomy to which world and home corresponded, had acquired, as we have noted before, a very special significance in the nationalist mind. The world was where the European power had challenged the non- European peoples and, by virtue of its superior material culture, had subjugated them. But the nationalists asserted that it had failed to colonize the inner, essential identity of the East, which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture. That is where the East was un-dominated, sovereign, master of its own fate.

Once this new meaning of the home/world dichotomy is matched with the identification of social roles by gender, we get the ideological framework within

which nationalism answered the women's question. It would be a grave error to see in this, as liberals are apt to hold their despair at the many marks of social conservatism in nationalist practice, a total rejection of the West. Quite the contrary: the nationalist paradigm in fact supplied an ideological principle of selection. It was not a dismissal of modernity, the attempt was rather to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project.

c) It is striking how much of the literature on women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century concerns the threatened westernization of Bengali women. From Iswar Chandra Gupta of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the celebrated pioneers of modern Bengali theater—Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Dinabandhu Mitra—everyone picked up the theme. To ridicule the idea of a Bengali woman trying to imitate the ways of a *memsahib* was a recipe sure to evoke raucous laughter and moral condemnation in both male and female audiences.

The literature of parody and satire in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century clearly contained much that was prompted (Guha 1998, 247) by a straight forward defense of existing practices and outright rejection the new. The nationalist paradigm had still not emerged in clear outline. In hindsight, this appears as a period of great social turmoil and ideological confusion among the literati—the period from Rammohan to Vidyasagar. And then a new discourse drawing from various sources, began to form in the second half of the century—the discourse of nationalism. The point of new discussion was to define the social and moral principles for locating the position of women in the “modern” newly world of the nation.

It is evident from the writings of the Bengali writers that the newly emergent middle class of Bengal were threatened under the peculiar conditions of colonial rule. A quite unprecedented external condition had been thrust upon them, they were being forced to adjust to those conditions, for which a certain degree of imitation of alien ways was unavoidable. New norms were needed which would be more appropriate to the external conditions of the modern world and yet not a mere imitation of the West. What were the principles by which these new norms could be constructed?

The nationalist answer is that the natural and social principle that provide the basis for the feminine virtues. Protected to a certain extent from the purely material pursuits of securing a livelihood in the external world, women express in their appearance and behavior the spiritual qualities that are characteristic of civilized and refined human society.

d) It was the central principle by which nationalism resolved the women's question in terms of its own historical project. In fact, from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century right up to present day, there have been many controversies about the precise application of the home/world, spiritual/material, feminine/masculine dichotomies in various matters concerning the everyday life of the “modern” women—her

dress, food, manners, and education, her role in organizing life at home, her role outside the home.

The new women bhadramahila defined in this way was subjected to a new patriarchy. In fact, the social order connecting the home and the world in which nationalists placed the new women (Bhadramahila) was not only contrasted with that of modern western society, it was also explicitly distinguished from the patriarchy of indigenous tradition. The 'new' woman was quite the reverse of the 'common' woman, who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, and subjected to brutal physical oppression by males. Attainment by her own efforts of a superior national culture was the mark of women's newly acquired freedom. This was the central ideological strength of the nationalist resolution of the women's question. (Guha 1998, 252) The paradox of "bhadramahila"/"mehsahib" dichotomy however remained a point which the modern education has compelled the nationalists to resolve satisfactorily.

It is this particular nationalist construction of reform as a project of both emancipation and self-emancipation of women that also explains why the early generation of educated women themselves so keenly propagated the nationalist idea of the "new women". Education then was meant to inculcate in women the virtues- the typically bourgeois virtues characteristic of the new social forms of disciplining- of orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibility, as well as the practical skills of literacy, accounting, and hygiene and the ability to run the household according to the new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world. For this, she would also need to have some idea of the world outside the home into which she could venture as long as it did not threaten her femininity. Once the essential femininity of women was fixed in terms of certain culturally visible spiritual qualities, they could go to schools, travel in public conveyances, watch public entertainment programmes, and in time even take up employment outside the home. But the 'spiritual' signs of her femininity were now clearly marked in her dress, her eating habits, her social demeanor and her religiosity. Here, too, the necessary differences were signified in terms of national identity, social emancipation and cultural refinement- differences, that is to say, from the mehshahib, from women of earlier generations, and from women of the lower classes. The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honor of new social responsibility, and by associating the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate subordination. In fact, the image of women as goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home.

The fixing by nationalist ideology of masculine/feminine qualities in terms of the material/spiritual dichotomy does not make women who have entered professional occupations/competitors to male job seekers, because in this construct there are no specific cultural signs that distinguish women from men in the material world. In fact, the distinctions that often become significant are those that operate between women in the world outside the home.

e) Partha Chatterjee also points out another significant feature of the way in which nationalism sought to resolve the women's question in accordance with its historical project. Nationalism, located its own subjectivity in the spiritual domain of culture, where it considered itself superior to the West and hence un-dominated and sovereign. It could not permit an encroachment by the colonial power in that domain. This determined the characteristically nationalist response to proposals for effecting social reform through the legislation enactments of the colonial state. Unlike the early reformers from Rammohan to Vidyasagar, nationalists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were in general opposed to such proposals for such a method of reform seemed to deny the ability of the nation to act for itself even in a domain where it was sovereign. In the specific case of reforming the live of women, consequently, the nationalist position was firmly based on the promise that this was an area where the nation was acting on its own, outside the purview of the guidance and intervention of the colonial state. ( **Mohanty 1997,173-174**).

### III

The critique of Chatterjee has its theoretical limitations in his inability to distinguish the "problematique" from the "thematique". The entire feminist study or in other words the historiography of feminist study assumes a meaningful character in the light of the post colonial discourses on third world feminism. The primary concern today is to understand the relationship between "women"-a cultural and ideological composite, other constructed through diverse representational discourses (scientific, literary, judicial, linguistic, cinematic, etc) and "women"-real, material subjects of their collective histories.

So, it tends to appear through modern researches undertaken by Benita Parry (**Parry 2004,56**), Cutrufelli (**Cutrufelli 1983,43**), Beverly Lindsay (**Lindsay 1983,298-304**) etc. that the centrality of feminist study has shifted from surface studies to intricate operation of paradigmatic constructs. By analyzing the feminist writings we come to the conclusion that the western women/men construct of the third world women is "ourselves undressed". For there are five specific ways in which women are common as a category of analysis used in western feminist discourse on women in the third world. If it was true during the colonial period, it appears to be as much true even today. The five ways are 1) women as victim of

male violence, ii) women as universal dependents, iii) married women as victims of the colonial process, iv) women as familial systems and v) women and religious ideologies.

Having had this “problematique” in the colonial and post-colonial construct of the third world women its reduction to “thematique” of cultural specificities become significant. While Ghulam Mursid has been naïve not to be able to understand the implication of any of them Chatterjee has harped on the second without the argument being framed by the first. It is true that there is something uncommon amongst women suffering in different countries of the third world but what is common is the paradox into which the third world intellectuals landed themselves by believing to be empirically true the construction given by the colonial intellectual establishment.

Therefore, the process of unraveling the truth out of the constructs has never been linear in a colonial situation. From Rammohan to Vidyasagar it was a bemused response to the western construct of the colonized women. They could not have seen the existence of two women in India, one being the product of colonial city and endowed with the benefits of colonial proprietary jurisprudence and the other, rural, struggling, driven to share man’s universe and consequently authentic. The reforms suggested by the mesmerized product of colonialism presumably had been circumscribed by the theoretical myopia of the vision. Obviously, the nationalist discourse could not accommodate this derivative discourse. What had been unavoidable for them was to give another construction of their women as a binary opposite to the colonial construct. It is true that in their urgency to give the construct they preferred the “*Bhadramahila*” concept as an appropriate paradigmatic opposite to memsahib. What is interesting to note that the qualities which they attributed to this *Bhadramahila* to be what they did not substantially differ from those attributed to a memsahib. Here memsahib was not the denizen of white racism but the imaginary Indian counterpart with imaginary attributes like using new garments, western cosmetics, sexually free etc. which had only forced moral implication. Chatterjee interestingly did not notice this category confusion in the nationalist discourse. However, the fact remains in the nationalist construct of *Bhadramahila* while suggested overt reaction and in substantially claimed to be a product of an authentic discourse it could have at least successfully retrieved women from thematique to be relocated into the “nationalist problematique.”

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