CHAPTER– I

INTRODUCTION

THE INDIAN WOMEN'S QUESTION IN POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The status of women in India has varied in different historical periods and in the different regions of the country. It has also been subject to differentiation according to class, caste, race, gender and ethnicity. Hence, the term "Indian Women's question" is highly contested. In fact, the appellation of "Indian", when used for the women's question, implies a political and cultural singularity that obscures the question's diversity, differences and conflicts. Moreover, the problem is not simply one of disunities but rather has to do with intractable conflicts involving the word "women" that derive from the central position of gender in postcolonial Indian culture and politics. In fact, processes of gendering – the construction of identities, roles and relations based on sexual differences – played a key role in the historical formation of the Indian nation-state and still cannot be separated from the other conflicting political identities, all of which play a crucial role in the life of a nation.

It is universally acclaimed that the primary identity of a national subject, whether male or female, is, of course, citizenship, whose unanimous and unmarked definition offers a promise of equality and justice within the nation's democratic, constitutional frame work. In the Indian reality, however, this promise has been repeatedly undermined by the masculinity of the nationalist ideology. In fact, instead of offering an alternative space, the nation has often simply functioned as an extension of family, caste and community structures, and defined women as belonging in the same way as those structures.

This definition of belonging is contradictory, implying both "affiliated with" and "owned by". While the first interpretation connotes a voluntary, participatory membership, the second a secondary, functionalist and symbolic status (Rajan: 1999: 4) and both are constantly overlooked because the social statuesque is defined by women's place within the structures of family and community being maintained and challenged when it is sought to be changed in the direction of gender egalitarianism, autonomy and freedom for them.

This chapter attempts to provide a historical context to the study of this complex position of women in the Indian society. However, in order to have a better understanding of the present social structure of India and the position of women therein, it is imperative to know the operation of various historical, political, cultural and economic factors moulding the society. Such a historical perspective is all the more necessary in the case of a society with a continuous history of more than three thousand years. It is also crucial to have a brief look at the past society because some of the norms and values affecting women today have their roots in the past. Of course, the attempt here is only to provide a general overview and not to go into the details of periodisation and its controversy. Here I would like to focus on our shared understanding of it, so that differences could be placed when they are encountered.

It has come to be commonly believed among the middle class that the Vedic period was the golden age of Indian womanhood, that the status of women was very high in that period, and that it was only with the coming of the invaders, especially Muslims, that restrictions began to be placed on women. In fact, all the evils of the 19th century, such as 'purdah', 'sati', and female infanticide are explained as outcomes of fears for women's safety, which had their origin in times of invasions.

Contemporary feminist scholars, however, argue that such a history is the product of the 19th century interaction between colonialism and nationalism. In fact, a significant tool used by the colonial ideology to prove the inferiority of the subject population was the question of the status of women. Apart from the characterization of the political condition of India preceding the British rule as a state of anarchy, lawlessness and arbitrary despotism, a central element in the ideological justification of the British colonial rule was the criticism of the "degenerate and barbaric" social customs of the Indian people, sanctioned by the Hindu religious traditions. The colonial critics and the Christian missionaries invariably repeated a long list of atrocities –'sati', child-marriage, 'kulin' polygamy, widow-immolation, etc.– perpetrated on Indian women, not so much by men or certain classes of men as by an entire body of scriptural canons and ritual practices, and as outsiders, they claimed the role of protectors of Indian women, interceding on their behalf against all brutal patriarchal practices (Sinha, 1995).

The reaction to this kind of characterization of Indian/Hindu society took the form of a school of nationalist history writing by historians like Altekar and R.C. Dutta. They challenged the colonial history writing by presenting the argument outlined above, that is the evils of Indian society arose due to Muslim invasions.

However, postcolonial gender-researchers like Uma Chakraborty (1989, 1998), Kumkum Roy (1995) and a few others question this construction of the past at several levels. Firstly, they point out that the evidences used by the nationalist historians are exclusively drawn from brahmanical sources and are, therefore, a partial history at best. Moreover, even if, as they argue, the status of upper caste women was high, which they contest, it was at the expense of the exploitation of non-Aryan women.

Secondly, the Vedic texts focused on specific geographical areas; the early texts referred to the north-west of the subcontinent, while the later texts to the east around the mid-Gangetic valley and the 'Manusmriti' to India, north of the Vindyas. From these texts, the 19th century historians extrapolated a picture of "Vedic India", an unsustainable generalization because "India" as an entity came into being only in the 19th century through the encounter with colonialism. Thus, defining the past in terms of a "Vedic India" presents a false homogeneity, which was then violated apparently only by external interventions.

Thirdly, even from the brahmanical sources alone, there are sufficient evidences to show that the structure of institutions that ensured the subordination of women was complete long before the Muslim as a religious community had even come into being. Referring to the two features, which the nationalist argument uses, i.e. scholarship and property, contemporary feminist historians of ancient India explode the myth of superior position of women in the Vedic period. Regarding scholarship, they point out that less than one percent of the one thousand hymns of the Rig-Veda are attributed to women, which clearly shows the then marginal position of women scholars. Further, Uma Chakravorty points out that the famous and oft-repeated story of the debate between Gargi and Yajnavalka, celebrated as an example of the learning allowed to women, is, in reality, an example of an episode in which Gargi is finally silenced by Yajnavalka not by the force of his arguments, but because he threatens her:

> Gargi, do not question too much, lest your head fall off!!

As for property, women not only did not own property, but also were considered to be property, the bride, for example, being gifted to the groom

along with other goods. They had no right even on their own body. In the words of Manu:

> Day and night women must be kept in subordination to the males of the family: in childhood to her father, in youth to her husband, in old age to her sons...Even the husband be destitute of virtue and seeks pleasure elsewhere he must be worshipped as god (quoted in Hunter College Women's Studies Collective: New Delhi: Oxford University Press: 1983:6).

Virginity before marriage and "pativryata" (complete physical and mental devotion to husband) after marriage were not obligations for just the women, but for the men of her family as well. On the chastity of women depended the honour of the male-folk. Men had obligations to one another to handover their women chaste while giving them away in marriage. It was as if a sort of contract existing between men to keep the women pure. They were excluded also from participating in a variety of material transactions, from giving and receiving tributes and taxes. In a word, women had certain limited recognition only as wives and mothers within the patriarchal kinship structure.

Clearly then, one golden age of Indian womanhood is a selective picture of the past created in the context of the politics of the 19th century, and it is particularly in this background that we can study the women's agendas of the social reform movement of the early half of that century.

In fact, when James Mill wrote in his History of India (1817) that the condition of women in a society is an index of that society's place in civilization, in one fell swoop "women", "modernity" and "nation" became essential and inseparable elements in a connected discourse of civilization

(D.Chakravorty, 1994), and thus "Women's Question" not only came to dominate the public discourses for more than a century, it also became the touchstone of the colonial – nationalist encounter, inscribed with the trope of modernity and the legitimating of political power. For colonial rulers, the atrocities practiced against Indian women became a confirmation of the rulers' modernity and the moral ground on which their "civilizing" missions could be launched. In fact, the colonial officialdom and missionary rhetoric singled out each atrocity to characterize the status of Indian women as especially low and Indian men as exceptionally violent, and this was really the mirror in which Indian men were invited to see themselves when colonial education began. The new urban elite, drawn mostly from the upper classes, imbibed the enlightenment philosophy of individualism and humanism and perceived the barbaric traditional practices against women as civilizational lapse and recognizable social evils (R. Chatterjee, 1992). Thus emerged the social reform movement, an attempt on the part of the new elite to redress, sometimes with and sometimes without British help, the worst features of the old patriarchal order.

Hence, "women" were in the forefront of all the main items on the agenda of the social reform movements. For the reformers women's emancipation was a pre-requisite to national regeneration and an index of national achievement. One strand in the movement concentrated on legislative remedy. A series of campaigns resulted in the abolition of 'Sati' in 1829 and the enabling of widow re-marriage in 1856. Another strand was concentrated with creating the female counterpart of the new male-elite, the "New Woman" who would share the sensibilities of the men in the family and yet be able to sustain their traditional class roles.

However, there are some uneasy questions posed by the postcolonial gender researchers. Firstly, throughout the 19th century, right from

Rammohan's campaign against "sati" in 1829 to the Age of Consent Bill in 1891, though women's issues were centrestaged, the social reformers like Rammohan and Vidyasagar did not interfere in the least in the concepts of pre-nuptial virginity or post-nuptial "pativryatya", nor did they interfere with the traditional ideology of gender in a patriarchal relationship. In the opinion of Sumit Sarkar, the Renaissance-reformers were, in any case, not the full-blooded liberals and were highly conservative in their acceptance of liberal ideas from Europe. Fundamental elements of social conservation, such as class distinctions, the patriarchal family, the sanctity of ancient scriptures and a preference for symbolic rather than substantial change in social practice were conspicuous in them. What they wanted in reality was that "a limited and controlled emancipation of wives as a personal necessity for survival in a hostile world" (Sarkar quoted in Kasturi and Majumder: 1994: xliii).

In her much acclaimed book Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World, Kumari Jayawardena says of this:

> Even before the nationalist movement had become politically active in India, the social reformers had started to agitate on two of these issues – the practice of "Sati" and the ban of widow-remarriage. They could safely be tackled because they had not existed in very early times, confined to upper castes and classes and, if remedied, would have given India the appearance of being "civilized" without endangering the traditional family structures (Jayawardena: 1996: 80).

Apart from attempting to persuade people to give up such practices, the reformers also sought the help of British administration in India, hoping them to prohibit by law. Initially the British administration followed a policy of non-interference in this regard, but its attitudes changed in 1827, when Mritunjay

Vidyalankar, the chief "pandit" of the Supreme Court, announced that "sati" had no "shastric" authority and other Indian intellectuals joined in the clamour for legislation against "sati". On this very ground Partha Chatterjee criticizes the colonial discourse:

> It was the colonialist discourse that, by assuming the hegemony of Brahmanical religious texts and the complete submission of all Hindus to the dictates of those texts, defined the tradition that was to be criticized and reformed (Chatterjee: 1993:119).

Secondly, critics have pointed out that even though the reform of the women's position seems to be a major concern within the colonialist discourses, and even though power, energy and sexuality haunt these discourses, women themselves, in any real sense, seem to disappear from these discussions about them. There was, in fact, little attempt to locate them as subjects within the colonial struggle. In the opinion of Lata Mani, the entire colonial debate on "sati" was concerned with redefining tradition and modernity and "what was at stake was not women but tradition" (Mani: 1989:118). In Spivak's oft-cited essay Can the Subaltern Speak? (1985) also, the complete absence of women's voices in the immolation debates is read as a particularly apt emblem of the collusion of colonialism and patriarchy.

Thirdly, the social reform movements were not eagerly welcomed by every section of the new elites. While the liberal section demanded legal and administrative initiative from the colonial state in this reform project, more conservative Indian opinion restricted colonial intervention into traditional social relations. The debates between these two groups have often been seen as a battle between modernists and traditionalists (Murshid, 1952). Lata Mani, however, argues that both groups were redefining traditions and, therefore,

"Indianness". Women were "neither subjects nor the objects" of these discourses, but only the "sites" on which debates were conducted (Mani, 1989).

Moreover, the 19th century social reformers themselves were not also unanimous in their inspirations and objectives. Many of the social reformers themselves condoned child marriage and opposed widow re-marriage in their own families (Jayawardena, 1996). In fact, the common element in their projects was their pre-occupation with the problems that primarily affected women in their own social classes and milieu and made them vulnerable to humiliation. These "social evils" brought charges of barbarity and the uncivilized behavior from the new rulers, the new teachers, and the new dispensers of rewards and recognition, and this pre-occupation with the West, either to emulate, or to assimilate, or to reject, was an inevitable consequence of the circumstances that made cultural contact possible. Changing socio-economic relations, the growth of urban living, the new modes of communication and education, as well as the pressure to acknowledge the scientific, technological and political dominance of Europe over the inherited cultural identities unleashed several tendencies that brought about many contradictions within the reform movements. In order to make it up the reformers had falsely assumed the existence of a domestic domain to demarcate what the colonizers found difficult to know, but without the knowledge of which the colonial state would not be able to understand and master Indians. This domestic domain became, in colonial discourse, the repository of India, i.e. "India's singularity" (Sen, 1993). Nationalism inherited this language. Like the earlier reformers, the nationalists also redefined the domestic space according to invented categories of the tradition. Their articulation focused entirely on the domestic – the family, the home and the women in it – as the locus of Indianness, which was nothing but the politically disenfranchised male elite's only domain of autonomy.

In his essay 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question' (in K.Sangari and S.Vaid (eds), Recasting Women, New Delhi, Kali for Women, 1989), Partha Chatterjee illustrates this process quite elaborately. In his opinion, in the nationalist discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the "bhadrolok" reconceptualised the home, and the Indian women were caught between the twin pressures of colonial modernity and traditional national sentiments. Hard work, orderliness, punctualities and educations were some of the qualities that were believed to have been the key to European prosperity and political power. On the one hand, books and domestic science exhorted Indian women to emulate these qualities that Western women had, and, on the other hand, "the quintessential claim to be different but modern" ensured that the Indian tradition should be maintained. Thus the questions of female education also became a colonial battlefield. If colonialists claimed to reform women's status by offering them education, nationalists countered it by charting a parallel process of education and reform, which would, as they claimed, simultaneously improve the women's lot and protect them "from becoming decultured" (Loomba, 1998). In the nineteenth century Bengali discourses, for instance, the 'overeducated' woman is represented as becoming a 'memsahib' or English woman who neglects her home and husband. In fact, frequent appeals were made to women by the nationalists, some of whom were even women, not to ape western culture. Following is an example from Kundamala Devi's appeal (1870) to her own folk:

> If you have acquired real knowledge, then give no place in your heart to 'memsahib' like behavior. This is not becoming a Bengali housewife. See how an educated woman can do housework thoughtfully and systematically in a way unknown to an ignorant, uneducated woman. And see if God had not

> appointed us to this place in the home, how unhappy a place this world would be (quoted in Chatterjee 1989:247).

Here the ideal woman is constructed in opposition to the spectre of the 'memsahib'. As Chatterjee sees, in their resolution to the women's question thus the nationalist males projected the home as a spritualised inner space where women preserved the age-old Indian "dharma". The material world might have been lost to the colonial rulers, but the home remained the site of nationalist victory.

The nationalists opposed colonial interventions in gender relations (especially in the constitution of family) on the grounds that these were anti-traditional and, therefore, anti-national. One such discourse arose around the Age of Consent controversy (1890-91), which followed from the colonial government's attempt to raise the age of marriage for Indian women. Nationalist resistance to the reform took the form of defence of tradition. The dominant ideology being shaped in this process relocated women from an index of social malady (as in the discourse of colonial missionary reformists) to an embodiment of moral order. The good women, the chaste wife and mother, empowered by spiritual strength become the iconic representation of nation.

In the opinion of Ghulam Murshid, "modernization" began in the first half of the nineteenth century because of the penetration of western ideas. But after some limited success there was a perceptible decline in the reform movement "as popular attitudes towards them hardened" (Murshid quoted in Chatterjee: 1989:233). The new politics of nationalism "glorified India's past and tended to defend everything traditional" (Ibid) and hence, all attempts to change customs and life-styles were begun to be seen as the aping of Western manners and were thereby regarded with suspicion. Consequently, nationalism fostered a distinctly conservative attitude towards social beliefs

and practices and thus the movement towards modernization was stalled by the nationalist politics. In the words of Chatterjee, the nationalist males refused "to make women's question an issue of political negotiation with colonialists" and that is why "nationalism could not resolve these issues" (249,233). What actually happened that the question of Indian women's oppression in a patriarchal caste/culture was entirely bracketed in favour of vindicating nationalist thought, and women of the past were valorized in two separate ways: (1) for their spiritual potential and their role as "sahadharminis" (partner in religious duties) in ancient times, and (2) as heroic resisters to alien rulers who cheerfully chose death than dishonours. This image fore-grounded in the Aryan woman a combination of the spiritual Maitreyi, the learned Gargi, the suffering Sita, the faithful Savitri, and the heroic Lakshmibai (Chakravorty Uma: 1989:46), and this transformation of the symbolic meaning of women had long-term consequences:

> 1. Their iconic stature rendered irrelevant any criticism of or enquiry into women's actual situation because tradition severed from social reality found fulfilment in an emotional and aesthetic imaging of a heroic mother-goddess;
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> 2. The idealized opposition between domestic and public had located women firmly in the domestic realm with house-work and child-care as their only legitimate concerns. Especially in urban India, women's exclusive domesticity became the most effective marker of middle class status (as happened in the Victorian Britain);
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> 3. The aesthetic, cultural and emotional investments in the imaging of women had also become the cornerstone of an ethnicized and oppositional entity, and "women" had really become the arena in which community, caste and class

> battles were fought. In such a discursive space, women were not only the ground for enactment of these agendas, which were directed elsewhere but the direct targets of those agendas.

Thus only a small group of elite women became the crucial beneficiaries of colonial modernity and were able to negotiate patriarchal (and class) spaces to have access to education and employment and to aspire to political leadership. This recasting of patriarchy in the image of high-caste and the upper class norms also meant that most women were left out not only of the benefits of modernity but were deprived even of their traditional rights and freedoms. There was not only increasing divergences in the trajectories of upper caste/middle class urban women and the "others", but the very process that underlay the modernization of the first group became the foundation for further disempowering of the poor, low caste and minority women. Hence, the postcolonial feminists have asked the question as to how far women in the national movement were "feminist" as opposed to being "nationalist". Certainly the women's movements of this period did not call it feminist because that would imply priority to women's liberation. So it stressed rather the joint struggle for national and gender equality. At that time it was imperialism rather than the family that was focused upon as the root of inequality; but nevertheless, as it is clear from the demands for female suffrage and guarantees of sexual equality in the constitution that there was obviously a clear feminine agenda as well.

Parallel to the growth of nationalism, there were also movements of low castes, peasants and "adivasis" who built up counter-narratives to the nationalist narrative. Jyotiba Phule may be taken to be the founding father of not only 'dalit' and anti-caste movements in India, but also of the women's movements in Maharastra. Phule's anti-caste movement developed an image

of womanhood based on the identities and symbols of low caste 'dalits' and peasants. Within this alternative framework women resisted their oppression and developed a new self-identity (Akerkar, 1995). In course of the "tebhaga" movement (a peasant struggle in Bengal for the right to one third of the crop) and the Telengana struggle against feudal exploitation, women also raised questions of oppression of women in the family by their own men (Menon, 1996). However, these counter-narratives were suppressed under the meta-narrative of nationalism and it can be claimed that the new patriarchy which the nationalist discourse set up as a hegemonic construct thus distinguished itself among the new middle class, admittedly a widening class and large enough in absolute numbers to be self reproducing, though was irrelevant to the large mass of the subordinate classes. In fact, the formation of the nation-state on the basis of a selective reconstruction of a golden past was exhausting because we did not have a homogeneous history. It had a diverse past of many religions, many languages and many people, and in a multi-cultural country the state is responsible for the preservation and security of all the minorities, marginalized groups and ethnic identities. It should be based on pluralities and, true to this very spirit of pluralism, postcolonial feminist discourses address Indian women's questions from various grounds – class, caste, race and gender. These varied identities do not suggest any uniform identity as they come from different socio-economic and political fabric of India and sometimes they are identified on the basis of suppression, oppression and exploitation. Though the construction of a uniform homogenous identity was initiated by nationalism, yet these groups had to achieve the desired goals of space for which they had been struggling. Moreover, the feminine gender identity is an enquiry into multiplicity of cultural practice, particularly of discourse and representation in relation to power. It is a postmodern paradigm because post-Foucault we all know that sexuality when translated into culture, is not just a physical desire but politics. Moreover, the problem is multiplied when we consider that patriarchy is not a monolithic term and gender, as an

analytical category, alone is inadequate to understand women's oppression and to strategize for women's emancipation.

In a normal situation, the family and nation denote eternal, sacred and natural ties for national reconstruction. In this particular context, the woman, who occupies the space outside the heterosexual patriarchal family, is in a space unrecognized by the nation and so the displacement of her story is crucial for the construction of a nation. Hence, feminists working in different locations have questioned the extent to which the Western or first world feminism is equipped to deal with the problems encountered by women in once-colonized countries. Western feminism is rightly criticized for the orientalist way in which it represents the social practices of 'other' races as backward or barbarous, from which Black and Asian women need rescuing by their Western sisters. In so doing it really fails to take into consideration the particular needs of these women, the different cultural practice on their own terms and the different meanings in their narratives (Which Carby calls 'her stories' as opposed to 'histories'). Chandra Talpade Mohanty warns against precisely this in her important essay 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' (1988), where she exposes the production of a singular category of 'Third world' women in Western feminism which damagingly creates the 'discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the third world'. Mohanty laments that by conceiving of 'the average third world woman' Western feminists construct a template for female identity in the 'Third world' based on a series of questionable conceptual and methodological manoeuvres with scant regard for context. This is tantamount to a colonial act.

Postcolonial women's lives are equally structured by the economic and political developments at the more local level. Often there is a declared animosity between the local and the global. The revivalists and

fundamentalists may declare that it is Western or imperialist forces that are responsible for all manner of evils, including women's oppressions. But globalization has also spawned an international women's development network with programmes for women's empowerment. Some of them have certainly helped women to rise from the "Sisyphus stratum". Particularly in this context, postcolonial feminism must resist the homogenization of Western feminism, as well as the "power politics" of the "cultural nationalism" and must take into account the heterogeneity of women's situation in India or in the 'third world' in regard to class, caste and location. It must also rethink to reconstruct the Indian nationalist discourse, that rather than emancipating women encouraged the rise of a new patriarchy. In other words, there is still oppression of various kinds in the society that claims to have enough as modern. Old legacies are there as much as new forms of oppression, all of which have found expression in the different Indian women novelists (no matter in which language they write) appearing after the independence.

In the present dissertation I shall confine myself to the selected novels of the four Indian women novelists writing in English, namely Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Githa Hariharan, who represent the changing concerns of Indian feminist thoughts in the last half century since 1947. These novelists and their novels are obviously not random choices, but I have some justification behind it. As these novelists negotiate in their works the ground between power and powerlessness, in different ways they all seek to establish a woman's right to her body. Here my contention is that self-hood is not an imagined concept, but the struggle for space begins with the physical existence and the right to ownership.

In India female sexuality has always been viewed as a threat to social institutions. It is never seen outside a sacrament of marriage in which procreation confers upon the women a status, especially if it is the birth of a

male-child. Thus any attempt to seek selfhood or project subjectivity, or to work towards self-expression and freedom has to work through the body and deconstruct the received notions regarding "good woman". In order to go beyond gender, to transcend the body, the conflict between the social and personal claims has to be worked through the roles thrust upon women and the manner in which adultery and rape affect them. The relations of power, which I would like to refer in the course of this dissertation, are not reducible to binary oppositions or oppression/oppressed relations. On the contrary, what will be looked for is "an alertness to the political process by which such representation becomes naturalized and ultimately coercive in structuring women's self representation" (Rajan: 1993:129). In the conceptual framework of this dissertation, it is apparent that "resistance" remains the cornerstone of feminist activism in contemporary India, while resentment and rebellion are read into representations that defy traditional gender norms. In fact, my arguments go with Rajeswari Sunder Rajan when she asks several searching questions on how we might read feminist resistance:

> How do we understand the politics of the desire to construe gendered subaltern resistance in the actions of women? What, on the other hand, are the implications of affirming that "the subaltern cannot speak?" ...What constitutes resistance? In "reading" resistance, do we privilege the intentionality or the effects of actions? How far is resistance (merely) the space of socially sanctioned licence? Is resistance only reactive to domination, or caught up only in a Foucauldian micro politics of power? (Rajan: 2000:153).

The focal point of this dissertation stems from this postmodern sense of multiple sites and also from my attention to "multiple levels" of resistance showed by the novelists under our critical consideration.