In Search of Her: A Postcolonial/ Feminist Enquiry into the Identity of Indian Woman

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“The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the nation’s culture and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality. No matter what the changes in the external conditions of life for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (ie feminine) virtues; they must not, in other words, become essentially westernized.”

- Partha Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question”*

“What was gradually and carefully constituted, brick by brick, in the interaction between colonialism and nationalism is now so deeply embedded in the consciousness of the middle classes that ideas about the past have assumed the status of revealed truths...It has led to a narrow and limiting circle in which the image of Indian womanhood has become, both a shackle and a rhetorical device that nevertheless functions as a historical truth.”

- Uma Chakravarti “Whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi?: Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past.”*

A discussion on ‘Identity, Difference and Conflict: Postcolonial Critique’ from an Indian feminist perspective lends itself to a fundamental question: What is the identity of the Indian woman? Who or what defines it? In order to situate this question bringing into relief its complexities, I wish to begin this paper narrating an event recorded by Shobha De, a feminist writer and analyst. According to her report, a certain man in Orissa refused to take back his wife- the mother of his five children, after her three day trip to Delhi. She had gone to receive a special award for being a highly successful mushroom farmer, an honour she shared with hundred other farmers from across India. Her labourer husband doubted her character after the trip and remained adamant about his decision not to take her back home. The award winner is bewildered and apologetic, insisting that she had sought her husband’s permission to go to Delhi. Her mushroom cultivation has to be on hold until the poor woman is able to sort out the non-sense with her obstinate husband.

In this context, Shobha De raises the following questions: Will she say ‘to hell with you’ to the man who is questioning her character and go back to her mushrooms? Will her children be taken away from her? Will she be ostracized by her community or other villagers? Will she lapse into depression, stop farming and beg her husband’s forgiveness? Will a modern day version of ‘vanavas’ and agni pareeksha be forced upon her? The story raises many questions about the identity of Indian women within a post-colonial framework. If this woman from Orissa had to be present here with us and engage in a discourse about identity, difference and conflict, what would she say about her present situation? How is her identity constructed and what are the implications of that identity for what she experiences as ‘difference’ in her life? How is she to address the conflict between the multiple identities of her person?

I do not attempt to give any answers, but I have more questions as I engage critically with the notions of identity, difference and conflict from a feminist perspective. It is said that ‘a woman’s mind is a colonized mind’ and I am afraid that it is very true of Indian women’s reality. Though I dislike

1Cf. Shobha De, “Has anything changed since Valmiki wrote the Ramayana?” in Sunday Times, Bangalore, 21 March 2010, p.18.
*Both these quotes are from Kum Kum Sangari and Suresh Vaid (eds) Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History, New Delhi: Zubaan 2006.
generalizations, I am inclined to believe that there is some truth in this statement. Recently I was invited to a take a session on empowerment of women at a reputed women’s college in Kerala. One of the organizers, a college lecturer who is also pursuing her doctoral research, met me before the session. During a casual chat, she opened up her thoughts about the program and mentioned that she was comfortable with the ‘empowerment of women’ but she detested a feminist identity. On my query as to why this discomfort in spite of her being a woman lecturer in a women’s college, her reply was: “Better not to become a feminist. It will only create problems in life as one starts seeing everything with that lens.”

Indian feminist theorizing in the postcolonial framework basically attempts to decolonize the minds of Indian women. This is done through a critical engagement with the colonial ideology that is reflected in Indian patriarchy and by addressing the hegemonic codes of nationalism which emerged as a reactionary project to colonialism. The colonial discourse has served to reinforce the power structures and social hierarchies of Indian patriarchy and hence the task of decolonizing the mind is a slow and difficult process, all the more when it is inscribed also by religion. In this paper we shall first look into the association between feminism and post colonialism, then examine critically the role played by nationalism in the identity construction of Indian women and finally consider the feminist postcolonial engagement in deconstructing the defined identities in view of creating a liberative space where they can name or refuse to own what is defined as their identity.

**Feminism and Postcolonialism**

Feminist work is a constitutive part of postcolonial critique. However, it shares tense relations at times when feminists working out of different locations question the extent to which Western or ‘First World’ feminism is equipped to deal with the problems encountered by women in the once colonized countries. This problematic has implications also for the women living in Western societies with ancestral connections to the colonized countries like the migrants and their descendants. Nevertheless, the affinity between the feminist and postcolonial discourse comes from identifying the deep-seated linkages between colonialism and patriarchy.

Colonialism and patriarchy are both systems which are founded on power relations that are repressive, which operate ideologically and in concrete ways. Edward Said’s description of the relationship between the Occident and the Orient in his classic work Orientalism, throws light on the parallelism between these two ideologies. Said points out that the relationship between the Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination and various degrees of a complex hegemony. The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, “different”, whereas the European is rational, virtuous, mature, “normal” and what gave the Oriental’s world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of its own efforts but rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West.

All that we need to do is to substitute Occident/Orient with the terms Man/Woman to understand how colonialism and patriarchy mirror the same politics. The configuration of power that underlie man-woman relationship in a patriarchal framework is marked by hegemony, and the positioning of man and woman on a domination-dependency/subordination continuum. Like colonialism, patriarchy exists in the midst of resistance to its authority. The similarity between these

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two oppressive ideologies is evident in the manner in which both assert certain representational systems that create an order of the world which is presented as “normal” or “true”.\(^4\)

The similarity between feminism and post-colonial theory is based on the fact that both discourses are predominantly political and concern themselves with the struggle against oppression and injustice. Moreover, both reject the established hierarchical, patriarchal system, which is dominated by the hegemonic white male, and vehemently deny the supposed supremacy of masculine power and authority. Imperialism, like patriarchy, is after all a phallocentric, supremacist ideology that subjugates and dominates its subjects. The oppressed woman is in this sense akin to the colonized subject. Essentially, as Nishant Shahani argues, the exponents of post-colonialism are reacting against colonialism in the political and economic sense while feminist theorists are rejecting colonialism of a sexual nature.\(^5\) It is crucial then, to address the ways in which these tyrannical ideologies have constructed the identity of the subjugated, and so, feminism cannot be seen in isolation from the postcolonial discourse.

Feminist postcolonial concerns are raised also in the discourse on development. Indian born U.S. based academics Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohanty\(^6\) challenge the unmarked white gaze informing the different development questions. Mohanty warn us to look at the interwoven process of sexism, racism, misogyny and heterosexism and questions the sexist and racist imperialistic structures that make the fertility of women from the global south a central focus of development. In her opinion, this is so because in the neo-colonial development processes non-western women are cast as an international reservoir of cheap labour in industrial, domestic and sex work.\(^7\)

Developing further the links between colonialism and the development question, postcolonial feminist critics show how understanding of bodies are not only socially inscribed but also historically constituted. The understanding of bodies, sex and race are embedded in imperial and colonial medicine and science. In their opinion, the historical inscriptions of bodies are still reverberating in international development, where European male bodies reign as the ‘true’ fully fledged human type. However, Ratna Kapoor in her discussion on the new politics of postcolonialism brings in another dimension to the debate in her argument that colonial discourses, cultural essentialism and victim rhetoric are reproduced in universal liberal projects such as human rights and international law, as well as in the legal regulation of sexuality and culture in a post-colonial context. Unpacking and challenging authoritative gender and development positions, Kapoor observes that anti-trafficking strategies and laws have meant women from the Global South are increasingly limited in their freedom to move, are under greater surveillance, and are evermore constrained by regressive views on sexual integrity and women’s central place in the home.\(^8\) In this context it is

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important to examine how Indian woman’s identity was constructed in the nationalist discourse and this takes our discussion to the next section on the politics of nationalism in relation to gender.

Identity construction of Indian Woman in the Politics of Nationalism

Indian woman is not a homogenous entity but is marked by her positioning at the intersection of class and caste/religion with gender. Indian nationalism which emerged as a ‘corrective’ politics to counter the impact of colonialism and modernization, glorified India’s past and sought to defend everything traditional. As analysts observe, the nationalist ideology in its fight against the dominance of colonialism separated the domain of culture into two spheres: the material and the spiritual. The dominance of western civilization in the material sphere as apparent in its advances in the field of science and technology, its rational forms of economic organization and modern methods of statecraft, gave European countries the power to subjugate non-European peoples. To counter this, the nationalist agenda focused on the assertion of spiritual domain of the East taking it to be superior to the West. Along with the separation of the cultural domain into material and spiritual spheres, there was a separation of the social space into ghar and bahir, the home and the world, the world representing the material, and the home-the inner spiritual self, the true Indian identity.  

It is within this framework that women became the site for the testing and reasserting of nationalistic tradition. The world taken to be a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests got identified with the male and woman became the representation of the home which must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world. The main concern of the nationalist struggle was to protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of the nationalist culture, its spiritual essence. The recovery of tradition and the recourse to the ancient Indian past became the new colonizing narrative by which women’s identity was constructed. Far from enjoying the benefits of postcolonial independence, women came to represent the newly formed private sphere that operated "as an indigenist alternative to western materialism." The split between the public and the private enabled nationalist discourse to establish neat oppositions between male and female, inner and outer, material and spiritual, and the new woman defined this way was subjected to a new patriarchy. As with all hegemonic forms of exercise of dominance, this patriarchy combined coercive authority with the subtle force of persuasion that even educated women became keen propagators of the nationalist idea of the ‘new woman’. Consequently, as Uma Chakravarti has rightly pointed out in the text cited earlier, what was gradually and carefully constituted, brick by brick, in the interaction between colonialism and nationalism got so deeply embedded in the consciousness of the Indian masses.

This can be illustrated by the manner in which women became active functionaries of Hindutva politics. With the rise of Hindutva in the early 90's, the Women's movement in India saw the need to adopt traditional icons like Kali and Shakti in order to assert an idea of authentic Indian womanhood. This made it extremely convenient for parochial political parties like the BJP and the Shiv Sena to co-opt this discourse of traditionalism and mobilize it for their parochial agendas. Seeing themselves as empowered Shakti incarnates, the Mahila Aghadi (the women's wing of the Shiv Sena party) played a significant role in the communal riots that followed the demolishing of the Babri Masjid. This communitarian logic was largely a result of a nativist framework in which some women saw themselves

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10 Ibid.
primarily as community upholders of tradition rather than as agents of change. These regressive forms of thinking pushed women in the direction of a primordial past, even if they ostensibly expressed liberal feminist slogans.12

The constructed identity of Indian women- as feminist historians argue- served both the colonizers and the nationalists. On the one hand, the imagery of Indian woman as a silent shadow, veiled and mute before her oppressors and unquestioningly accepting a discourse that endorses her subordination was part of a strategy of the colonial state to perpetuate domination, as the helpless and weak Indian women in need of protection provided one moral justification for colonial rule.13 On the other hand, faced with defeat and humiliation in the political and material world, Indian men constructed their women as the repositories of all that was ‘pure’ and ‘worthy’ in their own culture.14

Subversion of Tradition: A Feminist Postcolonial Agenda

Even as women became active collaborators in reviving a nationalistic patriarchy founded on the revival of tradition, we can see attempts in the Indian feminist movement to subvert the new patriarchy in its own way. Indian feminism has progressively engaged in challenging the inherent assumptions of womanhood and has consistently attempted to clear socio-cultural spaces for the voices of Indian women. We shall examine here primarily two areas of interrogation which have been central to feminist subversive politics, the first concerning the deconstruction of the ‘Other’ and the second about decolonizing sexuality.

Deconstructing the Other

Postcolonial discourses have dealt lengthily on the politics of representation underlying colonialism, in the construction of the ‘Other’ - ‘the Orient’, as well in the self-representation of ‘Europe’. ‘The Orientals’, as Said observes ‘were viewed in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral political admonishment,’ along with all other people variously designated as backward, degenerate, uncivilized, retarded.15 The ‘Orient existed for the West’16 on its “natural” role as an appendage to Europe’.17

The ‘othering’ of the Oriental in the colonial discourse is reflected strongly in the representation of woman as the ‘Other’ as pointed out by the feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in her classic work *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir poses the question: “What is a woman”? and responds: “she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called ‘the sex’, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.”18

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12 Nishant Shahani, "Resisting Mundane Violence” - Feminism and Queer Identity in Post-colonial India’
16 Ibid., p. 204
17 Ibid., p. 86
The construction of woman’s identity as the ‘Other’ leads to immense conflict for the woman—within herself and in relation to man. Again in the words of de Beauvoir:

Now, what peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other. They propose to stabilize her as object and to doom her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego (conscience) which is essential and sovereign. The drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego)—who always regards the self as the essential and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential. How can a human being in woman’s situation attain fulfillment? What roads are open to her? Which are blocked? How can independence be recovered in a state of dependency? What circumstances limit woman’s liberty and how can they be overcome?  

The discussion on the question of women’s identity is made more complex by French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, who disagrees with de Beauvoir’s designation of woman as the Other. She argues that both the subject and the Other are masculine mainstays of a closed phallogocentric signifying economy that achieves its totalizing goal through the exclusion of the feminine altogether. For Beauvoir, women are the negative of men, the lack against which masculine identity differentiates itself; for Irigaray, that particular dialectic constitutes a system that excludes an entirely different economy of signification. Women are not only represented falsely within the Sartrian frame of signifying subject and signified Other, but the falsity of the signification points out the entire structure of representation as inadequate.

I want to problematize further the question of women’s identity and representation particularly setting it against the backdrop of the silenced and effaced Indian woman. For this I bring to our discussion the much quoted question of Gayatri Spivak: “Can the subaltern speak?” According to Spivak, if the subaltern has no history and cannot speak in the context of colonial production, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. Spivak gives examples of the silenced subaltern women by looking at the documentation of sati in colonial India and argues that she is always being written with recourse to a form of representation which is incapable of bearing adequate witness to her subject position. Lack of an account of women’s experience leads Spivak to reflect on whether the subaltern can even speak.

Spivak’s reading of the Indian women from the colonial discourses is frighteningly true even today as clear from the discourses around the issue of alarming rapes in Haryana reported by the media. According to one of the lead articles on this titled “Lost in Haryana Rape Debate, a Woman’s story”, a 16 year old girl who was savagely assaulted and raped by eight men shuttered up her heart and mind for the first ten days, hoping silence would kill her memories of the violence, wrenching physical pain and the waves of shame, anger and fear. In this context of Haryana, where 19 rapes were reported in 30 days, and the majority of the violated being Dalit women, Spivak’s question echoes again: “Can the subaltern speak?” In these horror stories from Haryana, we did not hear much the voice of the violated subaltern, but everyone heard even beyond the boundaries of Indian

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19 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
territory and much to India’s shame- the verdict of the caste inscribed khap panchayats, which was voiced by none other than the former Chief Minister of Haryana. In his prescription that the legalization of child marriage would serve as a remedy for sexual crimes against women, what resounds again is the question of identity construction of the Indian woman. This takes our discussion to the next issue which I consider is basic to the deconstruction of defined identities, that is decolonizing sexuality.

Decolonizing Sexuality

In its critical engagement with tradition, addressing sexuality has been a problematic yet important issue of the feminist agenda. According to Indian feminist theorists, “the sexed specificity of the female body” has become a site through which patriarchal discourse has inscribed its parochial agendas. As we have seen earlier, in India, the female body, and especially its capacity for birth has played an important symbolic and material role in the emergence of national or community identities. Here we take the discussion one step further to see how this has inscribed women’s sexuality. The invocation of “Bharat-mata” or the Mother-India by freedom fighters as a proto-nationalist weapon during anti-colonial struggles served as a form of deification which endorsed the traditional heterosexist role of women. An imagery deployed to express woman’s sexual role was that of her body as the as productive land and the man as sower of the seed. Feminist theorist Leela Dube decodes this patriarchal symbolism of land and seed by pointing out that in equating woman’s body with the field or the earth, man claims ownership over her sexuality. Just as he is entitled to have control over her sexuality, and over the product of her sexuality, he is entitled to have control over her labour and the proceeds of her labour.

An important feminist intervention towards decolonizing the sexuality of Indian women has been the interrogation of the deification of the chaste woman. In the path-breaking work on The Sexual Economies of Modern India, Mary John and Janaki Nair observe that the valorization of celibacy in order to build a nation of patriotic heroes gradually culminated in the exaltation of the ‘chaste’ Hindu widow whose abstinence from sex became a symbolic rejection of colonial dominance. In their words: “it is not virginity that is upheld as an ideal for women so much as the notion of the chaste wife, an empowered figure in (Hindu) myth who functions as a means of taming or domesticating the more fearful aspects of the woman’s sexual appetite.”

Feminist analysis has explored further into the many facets of the crucial intersections between patriarchal structures and the workings of obligatory heterosexuality. Deepa Mehta’s film Fire which shows a lesbian relationship between two Indian housewives generated severe protest from many fronts, the contention being the fear of the collapse of the Institution of marriage and stopping of the reproduction of human beings if women’s sexual needs get fulfilled through lesbian acts. However, a sharper scrutiny of the issue reveal that the uneasiness with the lesbian question is far

25 An important work analyzing critically the question of sexuality of Indian women is by Mary John and Janaki Nair, A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India (London: Zed Books, 1998)
26 Irene Gedalof, Against Purity: Rethinking Identity with Indian and Western Feminisms (London: Routledge, 1999), 37.
beyond the question of marriages collapsing. The homophobic discourse in India continues to inscribe the label 'western' onto queer identities. In a response to the film *Fire*, the Shiv Sena Supremo Bal Thackeray seemed to have remarked that "such things" were not a part of Indian culture. According to feminist analysts, the post-British nation state saw the need to assert its 'manliness' through an exaggerated heterosexuality that inevitably employed women as bearers of nationalist ideology. 'Masculine' independent India could no longer carry the mark of the penetrated receiver - this stigma had to be displaced immediately, and women became the convenient site for this displacement.

Today, the attempts to colonize Indian women’s sexuality continues. This is evident in the moral policing exercised by the so called defenders of Indian culture and tradition, as witnessed in the Mangalore pub episode, and in the campaigns by Hindutva activists in North India against "western" modes of dressing which according to them are 'corrupting' Indian women. Even as women bear the marks, sometimes violent marks of transgression on their bodies, there are also signs of women’s refusal to be guardians of the nation’s morality. The growing assertion of women’s sexual desire and of alternative sexualities, made visible through the mushrooming of movements and publications gives evidence to this. In India, there is a growing feminist involvement with the rights of women to their lives and bodies, argues the authors of *Sexual Economies in Modern India*. In their opinion, for too long, it was not women’s sexual experiences that were at stake, but the elaborate codes of honor inscribed on their bodies.

While the colonizing and hegemonic move continues, the counter-hegemonic is also at work as in the 'Pink Chaddi' campaign which became an instant success drawing thousands, in saying a clear and loud NO to the moral policing of the identity makers of Indian women today. This illustrates feminist theorist Judith Butler’s observation that ‘Inasmuch as “identity” is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of “the person” is called into question by the cultural emergence of those “incoherent” or “discontinuous” gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined.’ In this paper I am not entering into the debate on the ‘rape culture’ of India brought to light through the brutal rape and death Delhi girl in December 2012 and countless incidents of rape reported across the country. A critical analysis of these events, particularly of the many ‘solutions’ offered by the so called ‘god men’ of this country reveal the continued politics of colonizing women sexuality in the 21st century post-colonial India.

To conclude, in situations where ‘difference’ is seen as ‘lack’ as in the colonial, patriarchal framework, I find the questions raised by Butler in her classic work *Gender Trouble* very applicable to the situation of Indian women. She asks: “To what extent is “identity” a normative ideal than a descriptive feature of experience? And how do the regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity?” I think decolonization of the mind is imperative for a critical interrogation into the identity question, and for this it is important to initiate -as Edward Said points out- the “unlearning” of the inherent dominative mode, to which I would add also - the inherent subordinate mode.

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31 Nishant Shahani, "Resisting Mundane Violence" - Feminism and Queer Identity in Post-colonial India.’
34 *Ibid*.