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NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 18 – WOMANHOOD AND MOTHERHOOD

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HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Womanhood and Motherhood

- Historiography of Partition demands claims for personal identities of marginalized subjects, such as the women, in high political discourses.
- Women who had lost husbands and families had to acquire economic worth, and they could not remain confined to traditional norms of behaviour prescribed for widows — rehabilitation process suspended many social constraints.
- Urvashi Butalia, Kamla Bhasin, Ritu Menon, Veena Das — contend that rape of women, abduction and forced conversion and sometimes repatriation are a key part of the Partition memory not adequately dealt with in the narratives of decolonization and transfer of power.
- These scholars emphasize the need of **oral history** in the absence of written evidence. **Oral history served as a tool for recovering the past.**



Womanhood and Motherhood

- Since the colonial era, class, social, and ideological gradations among women were visible even in the agenda of various feminist organizations.
- The impact of Partition riots on pan-Indian womanhood further disunited the sex through socially ascribed compartments defined by class, caste and community-based groupings, whose one extreme version was the upper-caste Hindu gentlewoman taking after the symbol of Bharat Mata, and the other extreme was the Dalit female, often demonized.

Womanhood and Motherhood

- At one level, the urban women's groups contended for a parallel feminist *swaraj* (self-rule) during India's independence, thereby emphasizing female education in order to facilitate women's self-sufficiency. At another, they frequently relapsed to conventional feminine roles. They stressed the importance of traditional 'feminine tasks.'
- E.g. Nationalist feminism endorsed education that emphasized women's roles as exemplary mothers and wives through studying home science.

Womanhood and Motherhood

- While the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) aimed at unifying the elite Indian Hindu and Muslim Women through social welfare networks, it could not rid itself of class, cultural and communal ghettos.
- AIWC members' participation in independence struggle following Gandhi's footsteps, such as represented by Ashoka Gupta and Renuka Ray, chose political particularism through affiliation with the Congress.
- Diverse economic backgrounds and individual feminist positions, which demarcated the homemaker from the service woman, further accentuated this gap.
- In the political arena, they were willing to be recognized as 'mothers,' 'daughters' and 'sisters,' rather than individual female citizen subjects, and essentialized female sexuality through virtues, such as pacifism, self-sacrifice, and motherhood.

Womanhood and Motherhood

- Women's interest and participation in the anti-colonial campaign with Mahatma Gandhi dates back to the Swadeshi movement when middle-class women were first involved. Boycotting British goods with the goal of fostering local industries and cotton crafts were involved.
- The Gandhian interpretation of Indian housewife perpetuated stereotypes of essentialist non-violent femininity. The Gandhian female activists hardly challenged the prevalent picture of Hindu sisterhood or women's co-authorship in the making of a patriarchal Hinduized nation. They echoed the Gandhian viewpoint of gender as destiny, advocating socio-spatial demarcation of an individual's role according to gender (Gandhi, 273-275).
- Ketu Katrak - Gandhi endorsed 'traditional' ideology that control a woman through marriage, wifehood, motherhood and domesticity, asking men to be 'just' towards women while also legitimizing the male authority. His understanding of women's nature being deeply rooted in Hindu patriarchy, Gandhi was preoccupied with the de-sexualized image of the woman, which interlaced religion, female body's purity and economics with nationalist sentiments through a virtue discourse (Debali Mookerjee-Leonard 45, 50).

Womanhood and Motherhood

- In a traditional Indian housing structure, andarmahal refers to the inner-house; purdah literally means “curtain,” and refers to gendered and screened compartments within the house.
- The spatial arrangement in these households, with the courtyard separating the female habitat of andarmahal and the male dominated kachhari, is instrumental in defining the circle of mobility for the “well-bred” woman.
- The discourse of good, chaste Hindu woman was the embodiment of moral order, who empowered the spiritual entity of *Bharatvarsa*. The peasants, artisans and non-Hindus were at the fringes of this debate.

Womanhood and Motherhood

- Himani Bannerji – Through notions of morality, of virtue and vice as connected to the body and sexuality, and by conflating respectability and virtue with asexuality or non-sexuality, women themselves substantially inflected the sign of *bhadramahila*, the hegemonic moral/aesthetic/erotic configuration of the women of propertied classes in Bengal...Women themselves, through their own subscription to the same discourse of “shame and civilization,” participate in the same conceptual enterprise. Their construct of femininity shares with men the premise of gentility or female goodness, but it is also self-divided and self-censoring (174, 187).
- Ratnabali Chatterjee - the *bhadramahila*-centric signifiers, such as a spatially separated *andarmahal* (women’s quarters) and *purdah* (screen for women’s privacy), would traditionally earn a specific group of women higher social and moral status, compared to their poorer counterparts, who had to appear in public for manual labour.

Imagination of the Mother/Female Kin of the Martyr

- During the British Raj, the first reform movement for Indian women's position took place among the middle class in Calcutta in the nineteenth century.
- Sati, purdah, and child marriage were condemned by these reformers. Raja Rammohan Roy and Mahadev Govind Ranade were two prominent figures during this period who were instrumental in the transformation.

Womanhood and Motherhood

- The patriarchal structure of upper-caste Hindu families is settled on the ideological edifice of the well-protected *bhadramahila's* body. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar grieves the birth of the Indian females in a general misogynous environment. Similar discussions on widows are made by Kailashbashini Devi's *Hindu Abalaganer Hinabastha*, Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay's *Damarucharit*, and by authors such as Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, Jyotirmoyee Devi and Ashapurna Devi.
- According to the *Sanatan* Hindu *dharma*, *Suttee* was a practice of Shastric injunction with the view of preserving the deceased man's widow's chastity. The colonial India treated women's marital status as a domain of personal laws, and the British legislative machinery entailed arguments modeled on Shastras and Shariat in order to bring about changes. Reformers, such as Rammohan Roy and Vidyasagar argued from within the Shastras, to devise lenient laws for the Hindu widows.



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- For example, Rammohan Roy quoted from Manu's diktats to implement stern observance of widowhood in lieu of widow immolation, whereas Vidyasagar cited the *Parasharasamhita Sloka* to validate the suitability of widow remarriage in the *kaliyuga*.
- To make his argument cogent in favour of the widows, Vidyasagar had to support orthodox Hindu convictions, proposing widow remarriage as a precaution against prostitution, adultery, incest and feticide. By such statements, he shared the regressive Hindu viewpoint that marriage is the only means of maintaining purity of social order and channelizing female sexuality in a fitting manner (Bagchi, "Socializing the Girl Child in Colonial Bengal" 2214-2215).

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- P.K. Dutta - the “normal” girl’s extraordinary abilities formed the domain of *satitva*, which, while keeping to the eulogizing tone, did not permit any feminist supremacy to flourish beyond reconciliation with patriarchy.
- P.K. Dutta - The idea of the widow as a mere zone of desire was powerful enough to make her a consensual sign of sexual vulnerability. Muslim-owned newspapers, and individuals defended their community on the grounds that holocaust Hindu widows initiated these ‘abductions.’ [According to the Arya Samaj] proliferation of widows was an important reason for the degeneration of Hindus, especially because the latter could not prevent them from falling into the hands of the irreligious...a fear of the consequences of a widows’ desire could be resolved by translating her into a victim of Muslim lust (68-69).

Womanhood and Motherhood

- Gayatri C. Spivak - mass misogyny attains an economic dimension, as the abolition of *suttee* suggests that a widow, even if son-less, is authorized to her deceased husband's property.
- In the British's collaboration with the Brahmins in abolishing *suttee*, the central discourse takes place between the "noble Hindu" and the "bad Hindu," with the British disappearing from the scene, and the free will of the feminine sexed subject successfully effaced.
- In the wake of barbarity fanning the Partition genocide, performance of *jauhar* was rife, often with the encouragement from family patriarchs (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 306).

Womanhood and Motherhood

- Shibaji Bandyopadhyay interprets Michael Madhusudan Dutta's portrayal of the character, Babu Joychandra Bandyopadhyaya, the *zamindar* of Bijayanagar, in his literary work *Sushilar Upakhyān*: “‘Separation’ being his principle of operation, ...the more sophisticated courses are excluded as unnecessarily burdensome from the syllabus designed for the subalterns...After drawing up his agenda for the boys, he next turns his attention to the girls. And here too he exhibits the same graded sensibility: to avoid the unhealthy mingling of castes, he sets up, not one, but two schools for them. Having thus classified the children of Bijoyanagar into four clear categories, Joychandra surely has the rare satisfaction of efficiently maintaining the rigidity of a closed and compartmentalised society” (Bandyopadhyay 28).
- Bandopadhyay - Sushila's *bhadramohilahood* is a cumulative product of the European and the Indian moral components, and an outcome obtained after the purging of various negative socio-cultural filtrates: “And thanks to the careful tutelage of the two teachers, one European and the other Bengali, fortified as they are by the strong recommendations of the European women of Calcutta, Sushila turns out to be an exemplary student, a perfect ‘Nabina.’”



Womanhood and Motherhood

- Jasodhara Bagchi - the archetype of the newly rising middle-class woman in India, who was designated as *bhadramahila* in Bengal, had overlooked the role of a girl child, by over-emphasizing on the construction of an ideal femininity that could crucially reproduce class relations.
- Unlike the acculturated and affected womanly virtues and skills, the short-lived phase of a “girl-hood” was not considered worth of recording and analysis. The feminine games and literature created specifically for the girl child’s consumption were all symbolic of the carefully gendered education and housekeeping that she henceforth would have to take up as a *bhadramahila*.
- Her well-protected upbringing, controlled reading of only the “suitable” books, and exemption from physical agility – all contributed towards a quick deletion and replacement of her pre-feminine infancy with a consciously feminized gentlewoman-hood.

Womanhood and Motherhood

- ❖ **Bharati Ray**, *Bengali Women and Politics of Joint Family* (1900-1947)
 - Twentieth century Bengal – Struggle for power among middle class women. Its site was the joint family and struggle was between contending generations of women within the household.
 - Intra-female rivalry grew in the traditional joint family structure as women's individuality, awareness of their rights, and involvement into the public sphere grew, leading to its fission or alteration.
 - **Kitchen** becomes a site of contestation. Women contend to establish their authority within the limited space socially sanctioned to them.

Womanhood and Motherhood

- Bharati Ray - “What was the pattern of authority for this woman, and what was the nature of her opposition to the mandated authority and behavioural norms? During the early part of the twentieth century, did their attitudes shift significantly, resulting in changes in the joint family system?”
- Prescribed norms of Indian family put female child below men – denial of right to education, marriage before puberty, system of dowry, not exactly a member of natal family.
- Daughters taught to be obedient, hardworking, passive, self-sacrificing in order to perform original roles in their husband’s family.
- Their education meant to mould them, as worthy wives and mothers.

Womanhood and Motherhood

- **Kamini Roy** and **Jyotirmoyee Devi** – a woman is obliterated in the joint family system, unless she herself becomes a “**ginni**.”
- Mother’s importance and dominance deeply ingrained in the cultural concept of Bengal – deriving from matrilineal tradition and/or pre-Aryan mother Goddess cult ‘Shakti,’ not her beauty or sexuality, but motherhood put on pedestal.
- The image of ‘Shakti’ is appropriated by the Aryan pantheon and invested with new socio-culture logic.
- In the struggle for hegemony, the mother goddess has managed to retain her primacy in Bengal.

Womanhood and Motherhood

- Mother's omnipotence in household space - It is by the “motherly role” that a woman is able to temporarily tame the brash macho figure into a submissive son, through promise of tender emotional dependence. The mother-son framework reifies the figure of the aggressive hypermasculine character, who ought to be “tamed.”
- The post-Second World War female generation placed high value on education and career-oriented learning (“Women of Bengal”, 9-10).
- As working women began to contribute their income to the in-laws' household, they could no longer be physically or ideologically controlled within the orthodox structure.
- Even though the cultural ideal of the subsequently fissioned nuclear families more-or-less remained rooted to joint family order of discipline, the concept of time and temporality vastly changed for the working new-age women, in many cases also earning them a “positive relaxation” from their in-laws' control (“Bengali Women” 3018).

Womanhood and Motherhood

- Women have been denied fundamentally new possibilities due to a lack of career prospects, the limits of a developing economy, and emotional attachment to one's tradition.
- This is because the female authority structure is based on a male authority and is influenced by, as well as defined by, the greater society and culture's economic and power domains.
- In an Indian milieu, class, caste, gender and family integrally interconnected, so radical alteration of familial power-structure calls for a fundamental metamorphosis of the entire socio economic, political, cultural network.

Thank You

