

Discourses on Womanhood from Late Nineteenth Century to Early Twentieth Century: A Comparative Study of Views of Pandita Ramabai and Mahatma Gandhi on Women

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Abstract

Women's question which was given the utmost importance in the early and mid- nineteenth century was put into the periphery towards the close of the century and the reason behind it being the primary importance given to the politics of nationalism. Penetration of western manners in every sphere agitated the nationalists and so the new politics of nationalism gave importance to the glorified past of India and culture and opposed everything which was western. In the nationalist project of the preservation of the spirituality and culture of the nation to establish self-identity of the nation, nationalists gave importance to women's question because they put this responsibility on their shoulders. In order to understand how women's question was handled during the late nineteenth century and how the discourses on ideal womanhood were created, one needs to understand the nationalist ideology which played a great role in its construction. One can't understand this outside the politics of nationalism. Thus this paper undertakes a study of some speeches of Mahatma Gandhi on women and analyzes them in order to see whether Gandhi's ideology of womanhood fits to the framework or he is saying something more. The paper also studies other discourses of womanhood. Hence, the paper looks at the perspective of Indian woman of representing womanhood in the context of the book *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1888) written by Pandita Ramabai Saraswati. Thus the paper studies two discourses: one of the masculinist perspective represented by Gandhi and the second of the Indian woman represented by Ramabai.

Key Words: Nationalism, Women's question, Discourses of womanhood, Colonial India

Women's question which was given the utmost importance in the early and mid-nineteenth century was put into the periphery towards the close of the century and the reason behind it being the primary importance given to the politics of nationalism. Penetration of western manners in every sphere agitated the nationalists and so the new politics of nationalism gave importance to the glorified past of India and culture and opposed everything which was western. In the nationalist project of the preservation of the spirituality and culture of

the nation to establish self- identity of the nation, nationalists gave importance to women's question because they put this responsibility on their shoulders. In order to understand how women's question was handled during the late nineteenth century and how the discourses on ideal womanhood were created, one needs to understand the nationalist ideology which played a great role in its construction. One can't understand this outside the politics of nationalism.

In this project I would discuss the modern discourses of studying about the womanhood of Indian woman of the late nineteenth century. I would like to discuss how modern scholars like Partha Chatterjee, the multidisciplinary scholar of history, anthropology and political science, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, the Bengali historian have read the women's question and construction of womanhood during late nineteenth century in the context of nationalist discourse. I would also discuss the framework provided by them to understand the question of womanhood. Then I would study some speeches of Mahatma Gandhi on women and analyze them in the context of the framework provided by these two people and see whether Gandhi's ideology of womanhood fits to the framework or he is saying something more. I also want to see other discourses of womanhood. I would look at the perspective of Indian woman of representing womanhood in the context of the book *The High Caste Hindu Woman (1888)* written by Pandita Ramabai Saraswati. Thus I would study two discourses: one of the masculinist perspective represented by Gandhi and the second of the Indian woman represented by Ramabai.

It is very interesting to find out how present scholars have addressed the issue of women's question of nineteenth century in the context of nationalist discourse. It is essential to understand the discourse of nationalism as explained by Partha Chatterjee which determines where to fit women's question. He uses the cultural domain to divide western sphere and

indigenous sphere. Thus, he sees Indian culture as divided into two spheres: material (outer) and spiritual (inner). The nationalists used the inner domain and posed it as a protected self against the western outer domain. Material sphere, the outer self of Indian culture was claimed by the western ideas like technology, scientific ideas, economic relations which are necessary to fight against colonialism. Women's question can be understood best in relation to nationalist project of strengthening and retaining spiritual essence of the national culture to protect the self-identity which was at the risk of being lost in the imitation of the west. The inner/outer distinctions create home and the world what Partha Chatterjee calls *Ghare -Bahire* dichotomy in the social space. The home represents the spiritual and the world represents the material domain. Thus, taking into account the gender roles defined by the society, the nationalists argue that material represents the men and spiritual represents the women. Thus, it is woman's responsibility to protect the spirituality of the culture. So the women should be constructed in such a manner that can retain the spiritual essence of the national culture and ultimately the self-identity of India. Thus the discourse of new woman was constructed who was different from indigenous traditional woman and also from western woman. Her femininity was defined through determining 'her dress, her eating habits, her social demeanor, her religiosity'. This new woman was given cultural superiority over other women like western women, lower class women etc. and hence the desire to be this new woman was emerged. This is the framework which we

get from Partha Chatterjee to understand how women was recovered from the oppressed condition and reconstructed according to the new ideology of nationalism as if moving from one patriarchy to the other.

Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that nationalists strive for looking modern still retaining the originality and traditions so that their modernity looks different form that of European¹. While talking about the ideals of domesticity of Bengal in late nineteenth century, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that women were allowed to take education on the condition that it should aid them to preserve their essential feminine qualities. Thus the concept of new woman came into being whose construction was based on the nationalist and western discourse of modernity. This new woman was represented time and again in the contemporary literature of that era. He explains how the ideal of modern housewife was tied with another ideal Lakshmi which is taken from mythical imagination. He further explains how Lakshmi-Alakshmi distinctions were used to term nineteenth century women. The modern 'Lakshmi', he argues was defined in terms of the nationalist discourse as having certain attributes which will convert her into *grihlakshmi* like formal education to bring modesty, obedience, rationality in her and these things will ultimately help them to do duties in better way to bring peace to home.

For Partha Chatterjee, inner and outer domains are two dichotomies which are unaffected by each other. For Dipesh Chakravarty, inner domain is affected by the outer domain. So the domesticity is shaped

by the outer rationality and science. Gyanpraksh in his essay, "Body and Governmentality" further problematizes the dichotomies between home and the world arguing that inner domain can be seen in the shadow of the outer domain. For Partha Chaterjee, outer is claimed by the western scientific ideas whereas Gyanprakash posits that science is not only in western domain because in the outer domain also, science got divided into two: western (medical science) and indigenous science (modern science like *brahmacharya*). Thus, from whatever Gyanprakash is arguing, studying question of women through these dichotomies will not give us clear idea.

We get insights of certain discourses on womanhood in nineteenth century created by nationalism from Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Now I would like to analyze Gandhi's perspective of locating good womanhood in the context of this framework and try to see where it takes us. Gandhi's speeches are the best material to analyze here. I have taken some speeches like "Speech At Second Gujarat Educational Conference" in 1917, "Speech at Bhagini Samaj, Bombay" in 1917, "What is Woman's Role?" in 1940, "*Brahmacharya* or Chastity" in 1940.

Gandhi also creates the distinctions between inner and outer in which he fits women at the inner world that is home and men in the outer world. His quotations would be helpful to understand it in a slightly better way.

"It is a woman's right to rule the home. Man is master outside it."(Gandhi 14)

“Man is supreme in the outward activities of a married pair...home life is entirely the sphere of woman and, therefore, in domestic affairs, in the upbringing and education of children, women ought to have more knowledge.” (Gandhi 20)

Thus, around these assumptions, Gandhi's discourse of good womanhood is constructed. Thus, if we adopt the home/world distinction made by Partha Chaterjee, Gandhi situates woman at the heart of the home where her duty is to take care of her household. He believes that education should be given in terms of the management of the home, nourishing the children etc. In the discourse of Partha Chaterjee, he finds out that during nineteenth century, education for women meant to inculcate in them the typical virtues like cleanliness, orderliness, personal sense of responsibility, hygiene and the ability to run the household according to the new physical and economic conditions. Gandhi calls her the queen of household and so her attention should be devoted to the management of the household. Madhu Kishwar in the essay, “Gandhi on Women” says,

“Gandhi did not envisage any fundamental change in the traditional role-relationship of women.” (Madhu Kishwar)

Thus, Gandhi's discourse of womanhood does fit in the way Dipesh Chakravarty and Partha Chaterjee has analyzed the discourses of womanhood of Bengal of nineteenth century.

Following the essentialismⁱⁱ the nationalists like Gandhi also was doing the same thing in terms of that they were essentialist in a certain sense. They on the assumption of essential feminine qualities like purity, chastity, self-sacrifice, self-controlled, non-violence, confined women to the inner domain. These qualities will make her a *grihlakshmi*, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's words. Moreover, Gandhi also wants women to use their essential qualities in the freedom movement. He says that women are bestowed with the attribute of Ahimsa which means her ability to love and bear sufferings to the most extent. Women can use this virtue to love the whole humanity and she can undertake the leadership of *Satyagraha* which requires stout heart which she has got from suffering and faith. According to him, the activity of spinning cotton at home, women become self-reliant and will be able to preserve her virtue. For Gandhi, spinning was very important for Swaraj. Thus, his effort of uplifting women's condition is influenced by the national freedom movement in which women become the great contributors. Even in the nationalist movements, assigning to women only certain kind of activities like spinning and excluding her from other activities Gandhi creates the womanhood which is confined according to the patriarchal gender roles. Thus, in Gandhi's discourse also her essential qualities of women were used for the nationalist purpose.

Gandhi's ideology of *brahmacharya* is very important to understand that Gandhi did not recognize female sexuality.ⁱⁱⁱ In his ideology of sexuality, possibility of sexual desire in women is not taken in. He posed

suppression of sexual desire as a masculine domain. In a way, if we think about Gandhi's life rigorously, it further problematizes this idea because his life in a way poses his self as one who is striving for the feminine self which is devoid of desire by practicing *brahmacharya*. In the essay, "Gandhi on Women", Madhu Kishwar states,

His choice of certain kind of feminine courage in preference to other kinds of strength and heroism reflects his vision....This vision stressed the superiority of women's suffering and self-sacrifice rather than aggressive assertion...

In a way, his life reflects his desire of achieving the state of ideal femininity by destroying the masculine attributes like aggression, passion etc.

Thus, I think that Gandhi's discourse on womanhood is constructed in the context of his ideological swadeshi movement, satyagraha which at large, reflect his resolutions about womanhood in terms of nationalist discourse where women have to play a crucial role to resist British imperialism. For Gandhi, womanhood is confined to the bearing of the children, becoming the good mother. Thus good woman is the mother of the civilized citizen of the nation. He is clearly against the working of women in the man's sphere.

The home in terms of Partha Chaterjee and domesticity in terms of Dipesh Chakrabarty is glorified in the nationalism by calling it a place which needs to be reformed in such a way that help them in the production of the different nationalist identity which is devoid

of western influences. Woman has been confined to this domain only and been the object of subordination on the name of reforming her condition. In this way, nationalists had created the hegemonic structure where women were restricted to the feminine virtues for the benefit of the national identity. Moreover, nationalists of nineteenth century, by creating 'new woman' as well as Gandhi, by creating certain notions of good womanhood normalize and privilege specific forms of femininity. This ideology reflects their endorsement of non-biological essentials of femininity.

There are other ways to look at the discourses of womanhood in nineteenth century. The book *The High caste, Hindu Wife* (1888) written by Pandita Ramabai Sarswati reveals the rigid customs and rituals which has pushed women into the oppressive world of patriarchy for centuries. It gives the different view from which real woman's life has been represented. This book is addressed to the western readers in order to inform them about the condition of women in India. She is very critical about the way in which Hindu upper caste women have been treated on the basis of the Hindu scriptures for centuries and the continuation of this practice even in her time period. Being very educated and rational her views on the women provide us a very interesting discourse to look at how an educated woman had imagined the Indian woman.

Ramabai positioning herself as a very rational and educated woman gives very radical views about the regeneration of condition of women during nineteenth century colonial India. She very strongly

rejects the essentialized notions about women by quoting Manu for whom woman is strictly confined to the household duties like cleanliness, preparing food etc.

In her discourse of womanhood, two things are indispensable which women should possess: self-reliance and education. The nationalists had not given importance to these two attributes much. They had constructed the womanhood in order to fulfill the nationalist project rather than for the benefits of women themselves. Nationalism aimed to create a new woman who is superior to the working class woman whereas Ramabai wanted to create a self-reliant woman like a working class woman. She says that women can withstand against the difficulties if she becomes self-reliant.

Ramabai describes the inner court of the houses where women were kept after their marriage. The outer court was not to be entered by them. Thus, we can see this division metaphorically in terms of the home and world dichotomy. Ramabai is very critical about the confinements under which women were left to suffer in the inner world where ignorance and suffocation prevails. She is against the view that women should only be limited to the household work. Ramabai is in favour of the view that women should be given education of subjects like science, history which, according to nationalism is the area of rational man. Education would open the ears and eyes of women to the happenings of the outer world, according to her. So she openly rejects the nationalist view which confined women to the education of mere household work and to the inner sphere of the culture

in the name of preserving spirituality and the self-identity of the nation.

Thus, comparatively, her views on the ideal femininity of Indian woman are quite different from that of the nationalists of nineteenth century as well as Gandhi's views. Ramabai has wider understanding of women's problems and oppressed condition. Her views reflect her intention of regeneration of women in its own terms to bring her out of the patriarchal structure whereas as Partha Chatterjee has rightly said that nationalism put women from one patriarchy to the other where they are the subordinate beings.

Thus, through this project, we get two angles of studying the construction of femininity in the colonial period. One is the nationalist masculinist angle through Gandhi's discourse of womanhood and the other is Indian woman's angle through Ramabai's representation about how real Indian woman should be. Both Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakravarty's argument that in the late nineteenth centuries male writers claimed the knowledge of how to organize their domestic domain of Indian middle class women inform us the other side of the politics of power and knowledge^{iv}. Thus, by doing this, Indian males claimed their masculine power against the colonizers. This project gives me the direction of the further research study how British men or women looked at Indian womanhood in comparison to the Indian men and women. I have not searched much for this area but I have got the website link which can be useful for my further research.

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4. Kishwar, Madhu. "Gandhi on Women." *Economic and Political Weekly* 20 (1985): 1691-1702. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 April 2011.
5. Prakash, Gyan. "Body and Governmentality." *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*, New Delhi: OUP, 2000. p.123-158. Print.

Footnote

- i. ⁱ Dipesh Chakrabarty, The Difference – Deferral of a Colonial Modernity in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, eds. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler. (London: University of California Press, 1997)p. 374
- ii. ⁱⁱ In Philosophy, essentialism is the view that, for any specific kind of entity, there is a set of characteristics or properties all of which any entity of that kind must possess.
- iii. ⁱⁱⁱ Gyan Prakash, 'Body and Governmentality' in *Another Reason: Science and the imagination of Modern India*, (new Delhi: OUP, 2000)p.155
- iv. ^{iv} Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda, in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, eds. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler. (London: University of California Press, 1997)p.13