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Reading 'Binaries' in Nationalist Narratives in the Context of India – A Dissection

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ABSTRACT

The collapse of old political frameworks of colonization and the reconfiguration of global power have been accompanied by an impulse to redefine, reassert, and reconfigure meanings of the nation on multiple levels. As colonial powers have begun retracting from countries they once imperialized, citizens of those countries have been given the opportunity to once again define their nation as they perceive it, rather than accept the definitions imposed on them by other powers. In this context, this paper actually is to examine and analyse the question of nationalism with gender identity. The key argument of this paper is that the valorisation of 'women question' in dominant nationalist narratives actually misread the actual nationalist discourse. Thus, this article provides an overview of some of the key concepts and literature in the study of gender and nationalism, including women; gender; the nation and the intersection of sexuality, race and gender within nationalist imaginations

HIGHLIGHTS

◉ Valorisation of 'women question' in dominant nationalist narratives actually misread the actual nationalist discourse.
◉ The nationalist discourse in third world countries particularly in India symbolizes the politically salient aspect of gendered colonialism.
◉ In postcolonial India, has emerged as a discursive totality that has subsumed the politics of indigenous identity.

Keywords: Nation-State, Colonialism, Nationalism, Gender, Sexuality and Identity

The Canvas

The colonial narratives however, tended to articulate the very idea of nationalism as a totalizing discourse and to allow for it encompass a number of different and even competing ideologies. Thus, the political doctrine of nationalist discourse is based on the understanding of a nation or a people, and it usually locates an 'other' who in-fact, is used to reinforce ties uniting the nation. In different language, Nationalism is particularly potent – manifestation of political identification. Thus, identities are fluid and at the same time, multiple too. They are fluid in that, over time new interpretations of an identity may emerge.

In the same way, identities are multiple in that during one particular period in a specific nation-state there may be various interpretations of identity contesting for

dominance or new readings of an identity may emerge to challenge a dominant interpretation. Paradoxically, it has become acknowledge that nationalism, in the off-quoted words of Anderson is imagined. The theoretical rooting of the process of nation building in imagination denies malicious intent to deceive or falsify, but rather pointing outs the creative attempts on the part of communities to build an inter – subjective identity marked by common cultural symbols, myths, heroes or heroines.

Thus, scholars have always recognized that 'nationalism' – as an idea is problematic from the vantage point of conflict between nations; sameness within the state is purchased at the price of institutionalizing difference – and too often, conflicting with among states. However, nationalism has also been problematic from the vantage point of those within the nation who shave least in elite privilege and political representation, especially those whose identity is at odds with the projected image of homogenous national identity. Gleason, clarifies these relationships by identifying three 'faces' of nationalism, such as, firstly, liberation, the positive association of nationalism with self – determination and democratization. Secondly, exclusivity, the promotion of group homogeneity and "difference" from "others", and lastly, domination, the negative effects of suppressing difference within the group and /or domination of 'outsiders' in the name of the group. Accordingly, nationalism loom large today both, in embodied political atmosphere; indeed how nationalist discourse is a sub – set of political identifications more generally, and how it relates to other identities - within and beyond the nation – are less interesting topics to discussions.

Hence, challenging conventional models of subjects and states as unitary rational actors, contemporary scholarly inquiries illuminates the multiplicity of subject locations and implying the model of multiple identifications and their dynamic interactions 'within' the 'self' and in relation to the 'self's' environment that is, identities are socially constructed as on – going process, they are embedded in and interact with historically specific social contexts composed of inter-subjective discourses, material conditions, social practices, and institutional structures. The dominant idioms of 'Nation', and the ways in which 'this' is reflected in 'nationalist' discourse, so often fly in the face of the shifting structural contours of politics of identification at the base is reason enough for abandoning some of their more questionable premises. Exploding the so called identifiable nationalist imaginations upon some specific roles is biased in its very nature. Although, a nation – state, while generally understood, by the range of its territory where its citizens occupy and its governmental sovereignty reaches, but the nation of 'nation' can more for beyond its legalistic or conventional understanding.

Importantly, not all nations are independent or enjoy free sovereign powers. Besides, a state cans emerge "without the help of a nation" and a nation can emerge "without the blessings of their own state". As a result, to define a nation with "objective factors" may "nearly always exclude some widely accepted cases of nations". More precisely, since the identity of a nation is a learned collective consciousness acquired nation, nationalism are not something the exists naturally but something invented and constructed in this sense nation be it a "community", "imagined" through "cultural artifacts" or "constituted" by ethnics, is a product of cultural construction. However, some scholars while see 'nation' and 'nationalism' as a national politics of belonging, which is concerned with the construction of boundaries of belonging, of a delineated collectivity that includes some people and excludes others, defines, nationalism as a meta-narrative that is a particular way of seeing and integrating the world, a frame of references which helps to make sense of and structure the reality surrounding us. One is common in these two argumentations are both concerned with borders and boundaries. In this vain, it is nationalism that defines the nations and not the other way round.

Thus, they emphasized that the discourse of nationalism operates in ways that divide the world into 'us' and 'them', produces hierarchies among actors, naturalizes itself and reproduces itself through private and public institutions. In this respect, they infect, divides the nationalist discourse in different dimensions; a 'special' dimension, which is associated with the territory – an actual or imagined homeland; a 'temporal' dimension

– the way to construct of national history; a 'symbolic' dimension, aiming to provide a grammar for the collective consciousness through its metaphors, its heroes, its rituals and its narratives; and an "everyday" dimension, whereby national identity is produced, reproduced and contested in the details of social actions and routines of everyday life that are taken for granted.

So, these claims one may perceive that the very nature of this argumentation in fact provide a communicative strategy that firstly; classified the world into homogeneous and fixed identity positions; secondly, creates a temporal lineage from the past, through the present and by way of extrapolation into the future to demonstrate the diachronic presence of the nation and lastly, it is based on a preoccupation with the national territory, imagined or real. Some argues that nations are figured through the iconography of family space and family as the epitome of nation and describes nation as "the national family of man", which constitutes a "social hierarchy" where the subordination of women children to men is naturalized. As a result of man's superiority in nation and family, women are often excluded from citizenship and subordinated to the nation as "its boundary and metaphoric limit", namely, as the passive symbol of nation, native land and earth, in such words as "mother land" and "mother earth." Therefore, it is because modern understanding of nationalist narratives is often andro-centric and male – dominated that the image of a nation becomes famine.

Narratives in the Indian Context

The contemporary understanding in politics and political institution in post-colonial state in India have been shaped to a great extent by the impact of British colonial administration. Under Raj, Indian sub-continent was transformed into a single political and administrative unit. Colonial rule introduced a revise of Western socio-economic and political institutions, of which take root in the sub – continent. The subsequent struggle for independence from Raj was in fact based on a 'tidal wave' of nationalist aspiration which greatly used cultural icons to show the difference of "Indianness" in contrast to the western culture reflected with the Raj. As a result, anti-colonialist nationalist movements

in the process of creating an "imagined community"; repeated and retrieved pro-colonial symbols and invented national cultures through which to challenge the cultural hegemony of the colonier.

As Partha Chatterjee argued, 'the British in India, by assuming a position of sympathy with the un-free and oppressed women-hood of India, attempted to transform the figure of the Indian women into a sign of inherently oppressive and un-free nature of the entire cultural tradition of India. Indian nationalism, as a reaction to this in demarcating a political position opposed to colonial rule, took up the "women's question" as an already constituted for it, namely, as a problem of Indian tradition. Although, the recovery, of tradition through the proto-nationalist and nationalist era was in fact always the recovery of the traditional women-her various shapes readapt the 'eternal' past to the contingent present. Still, one way of affirmation of "Indianness" was in not allowing the traditional image of women to change. Nations of Indian women-hood, entrenched in the private sphere, glorified as subservient docile and sacrificial become an icon of Indian nationalistic aspirations the image they projected here of women-hood, by and large also contributed in no small measure in perpetuating patriarchal norms.

Thus, the discourse of nationalism shows that the material or in the sense of spiritual distinction was condensed into an analogous, but ideologically far more powerful, dichotomous, that between the 'outer' and the 'inner'. It was in fact asserted that the material domain generally lies outside us – a mere external, which influences us, conditions us, and to which we are forced to adjust. But ultimately it is unimportant. It is the spiritual, which lies within that is our true self; it is that which is genuinely essential. It followed that as long as India took care to retain the spiritual distinctiveness of its culture, it could make all the compromises and adjustments necessary to adapt itself to the requirements of a modern material world without losing its true identity. This was the key that nationalism supplied for resolving the ticklish problems posed by issues of social reform in the ninetieth century.

Actually, applying the 'inner' and 'outer' classification to the matter of day to day life, in reality separated the social space between the domestic and public sphere. Partha Chattetjee argued, the world is the external, the domain of the material, the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. On the other hand, the world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain un-affected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation. And, therefore in extension one can gets an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into *'ghar'* and *'bahir'*.

Interestingly, the environment of colonialism and its ideological response of nationalism to the critique of traditional image of conservative Indian tradition introduced a new-substance to this 'analysis' and simultaneously arguing in response to the changing circumstances. Therefore, for analyzing the contradictory polls on nationalist discourses in its struggle against the Raj, the resolution offered two different points at domain of culture, 'the material' and 'the spiritual'.[20] Indeed, the 'material' and 'spiritual' dichotomy a very special significant to the analyzing and re-locating the nationalist narratives and as well as in the 'nationalist mind'. The world was where the European power had challenged the non-European peoples and, by virtue of its superior material culture, had subjugated. But, the critics argued, it had failed to colonize the inner, essential, identity of the East which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture. That is where the East was un-dominated, sovereign, master of its own fate. For a colonized people, the world was a distressing constraint, forced upon it by the fact of its material weakness. It was a place of oppression and daily humiliation, a place where the norms of the colonizer had perforce to be accepted. It was also the place, as nationalists were soon to argue, where the battle would be waged for national independence. Therefore, this required that the subjugated learn from the West - the modern science and arts of the material world. Then their strengths would be matched and ultimately the colonizer overthrown. But

in the entire phase of the national struggle, the crucial need was to protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence. No encroachments by the colonizer must be allowed in that inner sanctum. In the world, imitation of an adaptation to western homes was a necessity; at home, they were tantamount to annihilation of one's very identity. [21]

Thus, addressing the women's question vis-à-vis, nationalist discourse, it is in fact reasonable enough included the issues of gender, equality and rights of women in the nationalist history of the country. In contrasting older to newer ideological narratives, the very idea of women actually is misplaced in the edge-old traditional matrix. Now, the question is, how was the 'women' constructed? The answer is very difficult, because the issue searching the correct points to constant nay conceptual framework, eventually, it is very important to note that, nationalist discourses were a dialogue against the colonial presence, where the home symbolized the land, as well as the nation. It was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility for 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 virtues; the crucial need is for the protection of the inner sanctum.

However, the crucial need was to protect, preserve and at the same time strengthen the inner core of the national culture. In this respect, scholars are argued that the bypassing the own essential culture and value's and adapting to Western ways, actually annihilated your own self. Indeed, it is precisely the dialectic between the heroic submission of these mythical women and the modernity, the 'question of women' that nationalism seeks to maintain rather than repress. Therefore, the whole view of nationalist narratives on gender was used as the marker for the newly purified social spacing, country versus home, public versus private, and similarly, in the binary view of the social order. In this very circumstances women identified with the containers, the vessel for cultural values. In a new condition, where the colonial threat to valves and the family was removed, and the 'confused' women in fact

were left within a structured patriarchal family with an unchanged gender structuring and the sexual code of conduct. Unqualified to question the status quo, women lacked the sense of "being" and her identities reflected with her father, brother or husband. In this respect one may easily asserts that the two opposed spaces of home and country contain different gender based ideologies while reflecting nationalist discourse in India, while the nationalists divided the domain of culture into *'ghar'* and *'bahir'*, the first associated with femininity and the latter with masculinity, they were also ingenious enough to accommodate a metaphoric understanding of these seemingly opposed spaces.

However, Gandhi was one of the first to use the perception of the 'self-sacrificing nature of Indian women' as a special quality of Indian womanhood, based not a ritualistic dimension as used by the revivalist of the time, but on woman's existence as a mother. Gandhi's creation of the Indian woman was as a "moral mother" who is a repository of both moral and spiritual values. Undoubtedly, Gandhi created an avenue for women to emerge into the public space of politics by actively drawing women into the freedom movement. By choosing the spinning wheel and salt as symbols of the freedom struggle and the civil disobedience movement, he brought in the activists of the women – specific reproductive sphere into the public sphere of political agitation. However, his image of women had its roots in Hindu patriarchy, and while Gandhi's icon for national hero was 'Rama', and the stoic, chaste and sacrificial 'Sita' was consistently upheld as the national idea for womanhood.

Although, Radhakrishnan sees nationalism becomes "*The overarching umbrella that subsumes other and different forms of subspaces*", including gender which results in displacement of the women's question to the periphery. The 'purity' of the woman in the form of her regulated/controlled sexuality represents the 'inner' spiritual self of the nation. Nationalism constructed the so-called private, domestic, feminine sphere as the 'interior' of the nation – an autonomous space where the cultural/spiritual essence of the nation existed and which had to be protected by all means from the external Western impurities.[28] Thus, this construction of the

interior self of the nation as the 'un-colonized home' led to a celebration of 'domesticity' itself. Women were expected to completely stay within the four walls of the household to protect this inner self of the nation. This shows how all kinds of nationalisms are constructed on the bodies and sexualities of women.

Nationalist Discourse and Gendered Colonialism

The nationalist discourse in third world countries particularly in India symbolizes the politically salient aspect of gendered colonialism. In 1866, the Religious Tract Society of London published a work, called, 'Christian Manliness: A Book of Examples and Principles for Young Men' and the text of the book made a clear distinction between mere muscular Christianity and Christian manliness that included physical strength or martial prowess but also went beyond mere 'muscularity' to emphasize moral dimensions. In this sense the British saw Indian man as feminized beings in need of instruction and exposure to the moral and physical dimensions of Christian manhood.

However, "manliness' may relate to physical vigor and prowess ….. or to patriotic and military qualities, or to the traditions of chivalry, or to variety of moral qualities ranging from ….. general benevolence to the most awe inspiring moral rigor …." Thus, this multifaceted definition of manhood partly constructed the gendered lens and the British used to look at India and its male inhabitants. Although, colonial references to Indians commonly conflated effeminacy and lack of martial prowess in the tradition of hegemonic masculinity, critical observations about Indian manhood were also based on the multi-dimensional notion of masculinity underlying Christian manliness. In British eyes, the strongest proof that Indian men could not live up to the standards embedded in ideas of Christian manhood was that "more than one hundred and thirty million people" in a region of Asian equal in extant to the whole of Europe "was ruled by forty thousand British". Thus, certain sections of the Indian elite internalized this British colonial criticism. They in fact, try to ridicule themselves for their weaknesses and inability to defend their motherland. In 'Anandamath' (1882) Bankim Chandra Chatopadhyay, valorized these:

Who hath said thou art week in thy lands,

When the swords flash out in twice seventy million hands

And seventy million voice roar

Thy dreadful name from shore to shore?

With many strengths who art might and stored.

To thee I call, Mother and lord.

Vivekananda also illustrated the intense desire to create an indigenous Indian model of manhood on the ideas of hegemonic masculinity in similar fashion. The Sannyasin called upon the Hindu men of India to assert their masculinity. Implicitly, he placed in opposition the values of hegemonic masculinity to a feminity defined by weakness, indecisiveness and a lack of virility. In his view, those men who embodied these feminine attributes were and are Hinduism's greatest enemies. Therefore, it is simply articulated that in this very context, the voices from either side actually reconfigured to embrace the ideals of hegemonic masculinity and hold the ideological epistemology of nationalism in contrast to 'other' nationalist aspirations, as well as identity.

Although, the concept of the extended family in Indian culture which could, expand virtually indefinitely, was used to justify women's concerns beyond the kin group. The metaphor of the extended family certainly assisted middle class women's performance of some public roles through their associations. Gail Minault and Geraldine Forbes, in their work argued that women adapted the institution of *'purdah'* or seclusion a custom which defined the separate worlds of man and women to form their own associations. The need to be effective required the avoidance of confrontation by not appearing to be a threat to the established order. By projecting the idea that women's needs and nature were special or different, women were able to mobilize themselves in a public sphere of their own, not open to men. Thus *'purdah'* otherwise a hindrance to women's mobility, was utilized for women's advancement through women's forums in which women could voice their concerns. Despite the restrictions of *'purdah'* and without challenging patriarchal structures, it was possible for this rudimentary women's movement to acquire a unique strength.[37] For that reason, mediating

structures between the separate female world and the world of public affairs extended the female space. From women's uplift to national uplift, from women's emancipation to national regeneration was an inevitable step, as social reform and the growth of nationalist consciousness become increasingly close in a complex - sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory relationship.

Political Struggle and De-sexualization

Indeed, actively encouraged by political leaders (particularly the males), the nationalist struggle drew large number of women activists who did participate in all aspects of the movement of freedom struggle. At the same time it is noted that, 'while Indian women were to participate in all stages of movement for national independence, they did so in a way that was acceptable to and was dictated by their male counterparts and which conformed to the prevalent ideology on the position of women'. Thus, the new type of patriarchal altitudes towards nationalist discourse gave women 'a new social responsibility' not to imitate men, but to maintain the cohesiveness of family life and solidarity with the kin group to which men could not devote much their attention.

Thus, in order to participate in a political struggle, women have to negotiate their sexuality and femininity to fit in the system. This does not necessarily require abandonment of femininity but indeed the de-sexualization of the female body. Women *"Can play complementary roles which draw on their socially constructed gender roles based on ideas of hegemonic femininity, motherhood for example. This focus on ''woman as mother'' also circumvents any potential criticism of their perceived violation of societally prescribed gender roles as they enter nationalist politics."* Hence, in respect to these, by associating the take of 'female emancipation' with the goal of 'sovereign nationhood', nationalism behind thus to a new, and yet completely legitimate subordination.

The politicization of women in the newly extended female space was facilitated by the mediating role played by members of the female intelligentsia who had more time to absorb nationalist literature as most of them were not involved in working for a living. Many

become leaders in both the women's and the national movements. Thus, some critics believed that the fate of women was seriously linked with the fate of the nation and its narratives. In rewrite nationalist scripts, that's why we find, as with all such hegemonic forms of exercise of domination, the new outlook of colonial discourse, exercise of dominance, and more than else, this patriarchy combined coercive authority with the subtle force of persuasion. This was expressed most generally in the inverted ideological form of the relation of power between the sexes; the adulation of woman as goddess or as mother.

Paradoxically, whatever its sources in the classical religions of India or in medieval religious practices, it is undeniable that the specific ideological form in which we know the "Indian woman" construct in the modern literature and arts of India today is wholly a product of the development of a dominant middle-class culture coeval with the era of nationalism. It served to emphasize with all the force of mythological inspiration what had in any case become a dominant characteristic of femininity in the new construct of "woman" standing as a sign for "nation," namely, the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity, and so on. This spirituality did not, as we have seen, impede the chances of the woman moving out of the physical confines of the home; on the country, it facilitated it, making it possible for her to go out into the world under conditions that would not threaten her femininity. In fact, the image of woman as goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home.

Postscript

Nonetheless, patriotism now was subsumed within religious cotting, the nation become a vivid new deity added to the Hindu pantheon, and but a sleigh of hand, become at once the highest daily from the moment of her deification. Yet, the motherland has become the mother Goddess dominating the world of Gods and demanding the highest sacrifice from all. The special implications of all this for women, held to be aspect of 'Shakti' herself, were not left unexploited. Mobilization of women in the nationalist movement was made repeatedly along this line, unless the 'Sita' principle of 'Shakti' imprisoned in

women is released, the great act of sacrifice will not be complete.

However, some scholars analyze the role of religion and nationalist imaginary very different outlook in their works. They argued that in any religious prayer the basic theme is, delivering prayer one should be his / her ones knees, in respect of women; and they further argued that the act of prayer in fact symbolizing the real picture of submission and begging. In this way one may see, that prayer in the nationalist era is actually synonymous with degradation. Men in fact have 'always' propagated religion to keep women subjugated and more than else, religion is "nothing but" a set of regulating systems prescribed by men, it has been seen time and time again that men use religion to victimize women. In this broad framework, therefore whatever the outlook, either 'Sita' or 'Kali' – the exact outlook always be developed in brackets. Thus, the nature and contain of religion dramatically changed in post-colonial phase of Indian life.

In reality, as Rao pointed out that religion, in postcolonial India, has emerged as a discursive totality that has subsumed the politics of indigenous identity. While the institutional agencies of modernity forces the Indian state to constantly play "catch-up" with the West, the inner India seeks religion as its route to resistance. The two are in constant struggle and create conditions of violence, coercion, and denaturalization in their efforts to control the politics of location. Unable to "speak" of its own condition, radically effected by colonialism, rapid industrialization, and growing changes in the environment, the national subjectivity develops a conflictual resolution to its identity: if the modern nation can only repress the religious all will be well and if the religious can repress Western subjectivity, the contradictions will be smoothed.

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