

Metaphor of Woman and the Politics of Representation

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Abstract: In this essay I intend to link the image of woman as produced and circulated in cultures with the female metaphor constructed by male, which is not positively found in nature/reality. A married Hindu woman is identified from her appearance while her male counterpart bears no such identity mark. The Muslim woman puts on *burqua* so as to protect her from others' eyes. Inside the church women are prohibited from talk, they need to cover their head and only listen with head bowed down. In the three cultural forms stated above the metaphor of woman is presented as object of ownership of man. Woman subject has been elided in order to empower the man, she is stripped of her identity, liberty, and subjectivity- the qualities replaced by patriarchal attributes of woman- constitute her definition.

Keywords: subjugation, patriarchy, silent woman, colonial, apologist, statusquoist, religion, morality, representation.

If the definition of female depends on the notion of male, it is less gender relativity than how the male imagines the female figure. A married Hindu woman is identified from her appearance while her male counterpart bears no such identity mark. Her identity, then, is a culturally located tag of being possessed- the culture that compels her to be burnt alive when she is dispossessed on the death of her husband. In this essay I intend to link the image of woman as produced and circulated in cultures with the female metaphor constructed by male, which is not positively found in nature/reality. The Muslim compels the woman to put on *burqua* so as to protect her from others' reach. Inside the church women are prohibited from talk, they need to cover their head and only listen with head bowed down. This is a mark of submission which the Bible states: "Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord. For a husband has authority over his wife just as Christ has authority over the church" (Ephesians 5:22-23). In the three cultural forms stated above the metaphor of woman is presented as object of ownership of man. Woman subject has been elided in order to empower the man, she is stripped of her identity, liberty, and subjectivity- the qualities replaced by patriarchal attributes of woman- constitute her definition.

The fountain head of culture is religion, which seems to be gendered and male that structures the cultural forms in a way to obscure the status of woman. Since long, in human civilization, she has suffered, has been oppressed, subjugated, controlled, used, and misused for male ideology. *Manu Smriti* and Hindu holy books, the *Bible* and the *Quran* definitely place woman under control of man. Manu states that women are not independent; they must be put under control of men all through their life (9/2-37). He maintains that wicked and barren wife needs be superseded by other wife (9/80-83). He denigrates women and equates them with *chandal* and animal (3/40); she is also forbidden from reading holy books. He states that women are seducer and evil (2/213-215), they can't make spiritual/religious progress unless they are reborn as male. It is interesting to note that Manu goes to the extent to say that any woman who disobeys of her lethargic, alcoholic and diseased husband shall be deserted for three months and be deprived of her ornaments (9/78). In the above statement the law giver appears like a modern man, who humiliates/tortures his wife, returning home late night in drunken state. The *Bible* oppresses woman no less, in that she is made silent and a servant of her husband God. In support of the idea the holy book mentions:

But woman reflects the glory of man, for man was not created from woman, but woman from man. Not was man created for woman's sake, but woman was created for man's sake. On account of the angels, then, a woman should have a covering over her head to show that she is under her husband's authority (Corinthian 11/7-10)

The *Bible* denigrates woman in words like liberty leads to her fall and female birth is a penalty (Leviticus: 12). *Manu Smriti* and the *Bible* echo misogyny and deprive woman of the position and privileges of man. Similar is the voice of the *Quran* that assigns authority in the hands of man to use women as property, object of sexual enjoyment; but beat/stone them publicly in case they disobey their husband. In Muslim law and the *Quran* women are not allowed to education, property- right, travel, office work, citizenship. They are only private property of the male who can divorce them at will, which right is not allowed to the women. The *Quran* states: "Men are managers of the affairs of women because Allah has made the one superior to the other" (*Sura* 4:34). The same section maintains that "The share of male shall be twice that of female" (4:176)

Woman subordination in holy books may be deciphered as the past spiritual leaders' perception of women as seducer and deterrent of man's

spiritual progress. They were believed to be weak and unstable, the source of danger besides, the time and social condition being not favorable for women to be free, unguarded. Feminist construction of woman subordination and denigration as the creation and perpetuation of patriarchy, therefore, stands in opposition of the apologist. Suppression of women right and identity has been vigorously challenged, debated nationally and internationally. The challenge has been reinforced by theoretical perception and analytical critiques of feminist writers, workers across the globe after 1970s. They view that except gender difference male and female are equally capable in almost all fields of human achievements. Time has changed. The rational modern mind can't accept the old authority, or the politics of representation for the reasons: first, the religious orthodoxy finds resistance from all quarters of modern progressive culture. Secondly, progress and development presuppose repositioning of structural relationship. Thirdly, there is no rationality to view women as inferior to men in any front of human activity. Then, above all, women voice and liberty are essential for the benefit of man as much as for society. It is sheer male vanity and cultural blindness to ignore female voice and subjugate them- one half of world population. History stands witness to rise and fall of Divine kingship, racial discrimination, casteism, untouchability, apartheid, colonialism; and the driving ideology in support of these crumbles as human mind matures. The movement of women cause involves a double fight within and without- inside the family and in the society across gender line, gains momentum in such intensity that the previous ideals seem weaker in front of it.

However, religious apologists' recommendations have a little bearing in understanding the ancient holy books. Authenticity and variations in later editions of the ancient scriptures pose problems for right interpretation. One should not lose sight of the language, the cultural setting and the mindset of the past, in that what appears to be wrong, biased, unconvincing and irrational to the present mind, may be the just opposite to the ancient authorities/writers. The apologist in this context shifts blame to the culture and social practice which have used scriptures for self interest, but apparently lopsided view of the defendant lacking in authority/authenticity. Moreover, the fundamentalist/orthodox section of society, being statusquoist strives with the tools of culture, religion, and tradition to retain the privileges they enjoy with little in return. They are incapable of thinking otherwise or afraid of doing so and face the reality. In racial discrimination, the white fails to imagine that the black can be his

equal or even better, given the conditions. The parallel of which finds in Indian caste system, i.e. the upper caste Brahmin and his relationship with the untouchable '*sudra*'; the similar parallel exists between the male and female. The statusquoist concretizes his position, using, or misusing the authority of religion, culture, the past masters, and law givers, so that unquestioning, affiliation could be guaranteed.

It is ambiguous to note that religious authorities suppressed and dignified women simultaneously. In holy books, mythology they are assigned divine status like Kali, Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Juno, Minerva, Virgin Mary, Aphrodite etc. Again, the nationalist perceives women in the form of 'motherland', mother earth, wealth, energy. Imagination of divine women and 'mother land' are profoundly gendered with the implication of both female power and female helplessness. Assigning divine status to woman appears to be a patriarchal design to deny her self-identity in one hand, and to regard the patriarchal politics in the other. What escapes the notice here is undercut of female self and female identity; her point of view, taste and belief, her views on life and the world she lives in, homogenizing all these with the great tradition of patriarchy. Ironically, woman, the source of energy is helplessly crushed, subjugated, and oppressed in her own place by her own people. Like the religious authority, the nationalist concedes her to education, office work; to participate in national movement, with a view to making her perform domestic duty better, to serve and understand her husband better. But he doesn't accept woman usurping the position of man, and demanding equal treatment with her counterpart (Loomba 218). If the nationalist voices for independence/fighting against foreign occupation, drawing the ideal concept of 'motherland' without allowing 'domestic democracy and women liberty the concept of independence' sounds paradoxical, and the 'motherland' turns out a parody. When domestic patriarchy degenerates in to colonial power, it is absurd to fight for independence. If the nationalist is reluctant to allow independence to the native female, and call on the native to make the 'motherland' independent of foreign occupation, then the double standard reminds us of the double standard maintained by the colonial power. The colonial oppression of the colonized is the story repeated in women subjugation and oppression.

In patriarchal culture the female is voiceless subaltern, gazing at the powerful male- smart, sportive, busy in discovering the new world of

power, pleasure and self indulgence, at the same time the silent female stands apart in voyeuristic gazing; ready to carry out order of the male with all submissiveness. She is never free and herself, or equal to the male. Culturally she is made to bear and rear the child and serve her male in the family, bound by the discipline imposed on her. Any attempt to overstep the frontiers invites social sanction and a moral downfall, which fear compels her to forget her self-identify. The powerful male, then, is a colonial master who represents her and speaks for her. Does the white consider the black as his equal with a difference? The white is civilized, educated, intellectually rich, and made by God to master over the savage black- mindless and weak. God has given the white power, made him superior to subjugate and civilize the black and decide for them what is right and what is wrong. The female is a metaphor of the black-subaltern, voiceless and weak. Flaubert provides a powerful metaphor in the form of Kuchuk Hanem, an Egyptian courtesan and a model of Oriental woman: "She never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically, but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was typically Oriental" (*Orientalism* 23-24). The patriarchal colonialism is a story, here, told historically through European colonialism/foreign occupation and racial discrimination.

In patriarchal culture, the idea of woman is not a positive term; it is a construct of the male and unsubstative. The history of human civilization is a history of class struggle in which female gender is doubly oppressed- within the family and outside, by both the colonial and the native. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's "Can the Subalter Speak?" draws attention to the combined work of colonialism and patriarchy in silencing the subaltern with the metaphor of 'widow burning' in India. "The Plight of Hindu Windows as Described by a Window Herself" presents in this narrative: None of her relatives will touch her to take her ornaments off her body. The task is assigned to three women from the barber caste... those female fiends literally jump all over her and violently tear all ornaments from her nose, ear etc. In that rush, the delicate bones of the nose and ear are sometimes broken. Sometimes... tufts of hair are also plucked off... Once, a widow who was a relative of mine died in front of me. She had fallen ill before her husband died. When he died, she was so

weak that she could not even to be dragged to her husband's cremation. She had a burning fever. Then her mother-in-law dragged her down from the cot onto the ground and ordered the servant to pour bucketfuls of cold water over her. After some eight hours, she died. But nobody came to see how she was when she was dying of the cold. After she died, however they stated praising her, saying she had died for the love of her husband (Tharu and Lalita 359-363)

The site of 'widow burning' is a hot debate involving the colonialist, the nationalist, the orthodox fundamentalist, and the native. But the subject itself is absent or silent. No agent seems to take account of what the subject window feels, what is her voice, yet her story is told, debated without having any knowledge of her interiority, and the suffering she undertakes. She is like Kuchuk Hanem and the reader is told in what way she is a '*sati*'. Rousseau puts highest importance on human liberty, and relates liberty with morality: "To renounce liberty is to renounce being a man, to surrender the rights of humanity and even its duties... Such a renunciation is incompatible with man's nature; to remove all liberty from his will is to remove all morality from his acts" (Danta.153). If women lack in liberty, they are devoid of humanity, and lose the faculty of morality, which arise from a candid and free mind that perceives right and wrong, duty and obligation. Subjugated women are no better than domestic animals; they are never awakened to reflect the state of morality. On the other hand, subjugation leads to corruption and lies, affecting social environment and spiritual loftiness. Moral corruption is a shared ground, if a woman falls corrupt, she drags the man she falls with, or the society she inhabits in, directing attention to interrelatedness of both morality and liberty. It is clear that politics of gender discrimination harms the whole society instead of subjugating the targeted gender.

The feminist's claims prominently figure in gender equality and female identity, the latter being more complex than the former. Gender politics homogenizes differences of female sex with that of the patriarchal male, which is the focal point of feminist movement. Female as a gender is the other of the male, having different biological constitution and feeling; for example, a thing of beauty evokes different feelings both in a male and a female's mind, which delicate issue needs be recognized, respected. Gender equality and identity, then, are not only legal issues, but are more inclusive of change in the male's attitude and mind set. Not only the recognition, but honour and regard of the other's difference are essential in order to maintain the equal partnership of the family, society, and state.

Humanism is the greatest religion, above religions; and secularism is the greatest culture above cultures. Human civilization has experienced cultures, religions, philosophy, science and humanities, art and literature change from time to time; rise and decline, but human relationship- male-female partnership is eternal/natural. The lasting value of natural unity need not be polluted for the sake of any ideology, religion, or politics. The post-modern mind understands the logic, but poorly responds to the question of total change- restructuring of the ailing structure.

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