

Research Article

QUESTIONING COLONIAL STEREOTYPES OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACES: WOMEN WRITING IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The conflict around the debate of the public vs the private space is significant in reading the 19th century women's literature which has been rediscovered by feminist critics in order to revise the canon. An analysis of the first autobiography of an Indian woman followed by a critical evaluation of a few twentieth and twenty first century women writers who have portrayed this debate in their works is the objective of this paper.

Keywords: Public, Private, Conflict, Negotiation, Resolution.

INTRODUCTION

The 19th century and prevailing gender issues have always been significant for Indian readers. Uma Chakravorty has said that the womanhood model invented in the 19th century has continued to superimpose itself in the 20th, going on to construct the Sita-Savitri model that envelops so much of the social world today. (Loomba, p.159) We have to start our analysis in 19th century India. Ania Loomba in her book *Colonialism/Post colonialism* makes it clear that from the beginning of the colonial period, female bodies stand for the conquered land. (ibid. p.160)

According to Helen Carr:

In the language of colonialism, non-European occupy the same symbolic space as women. Both are seen as part of nature, not culture...described always in terms of lack—no initiative, no intellectual powers, no perseverance... (ibid. p.173)

In a thought-provoking essay, Nancy Lee Stepan argues that in the 19th century, it was claimed that women's low brain weights and deficient brain structures were analogous to those of the lower races and their inferior intellectuality explained on this basis. In rural Africa, the dominance of women over farming and the crops they managed to produce declined with the coming of the slave trade. (ibid. p.174) Colonialism increased patriarchal associations in colonial areas often because of native men who were constantly excluded from the public domain became autocratic and aggressive at home.

As Ania Loomba puts it:

The process whereby women became the metaphor for indigenous culture was reinforced by colonial law, which sought to mold the public sphere according to European ideals, but emphasized religion and custom as the basis for personal law in colonized countries. (ibid. p.174)

The family as a unit was also seen as a metaphor for the nation-state. It was beyond time and space, constant, unchanging. It was always talked about as a private realm as opposed to the nation which was

seen as a public realm. Woman was also seen as the 'mother' of the nation but she had limited powers. The purpose of educating women was inspiring solely because of their role as wives and mothers. Even after acquiring education, a woman was not to overstep her boundaries and take away the control which had always been in the hands of men.

"If you have acquired real knowledge, then give no place in your heart to Memsahib like behavior. That is not becoming in a Bengali housewife. See how an educated woman can do housework thoughtfully and systematically in a way unknown to an ignorant uneducated woman. And see if God had not appointed us to this place in the home, how unhappy a place this world would be?" This appeal is issued by a woman. (Sangari, p.247)

Meredith Borthwick reiterates this point:

...these models, clearest in the 'bhadramahila' of the late 19th century Bengali reformist circles, seem a peculiar amalgam of Brahminic and middle class Victorian social values, with their emphasis on wives that were at once selfless angels of the hearth and cultivated helpmates to their husbands. (ibid. p.148)

Further, people believed that politics and state governance formulated an outer, social domain as opposed to the domestic arena as a sacramental space for family and religion. Thus, the 19th century witnessed a gradual obliteration of women from the outside world of commerce and governance. A respectable woman was best seen in her own private sphere of domesticity extolling the concepts of an enlightened wife and mother as an educated woman. If the colonized men asserted their authority and established the norms of patriarchy within the confines of their homes, women's writings are often witness to this pain that came as a result of these changes. Thus, if women have always been the victims of patriarchy and the duality of the world, we must explore their identity in the discourses which not only negate their existence but also their self-representation elsewhere. The women who had to bear with these stereotypes, keep themselves silent and suffer humiliation at the hands of men have written their life writings, journals and diaries. This alternate canon of works is now available to contemporary readers. Women have always managed to express themselves and found a medium to tell their

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stories, whether it is someone like Rassundari Debi of 19th century rural Bengal who wrote the very first autobiography in Bangla after teaching herself to read and write, or Anita Agnihotri whose anthology 'Forest Interludes' was published in 2001 and was hailed for its candid portrayal of a woman IAS officer struggling to deal with gender bias in her workplace and community. In the intervening period between these two women writers, there are endless writings of and by women like Binodini Dasi, Ashapura Debi (Bangla), Kundanika Kapadia (Gujarati), Ambai (Tamil) Lalithambika Antarjanamand Bama (Malayalam) and Sara Aboobacker (Kannada) etc. There have been Hindi fiction writers like Krishna Sobti, Mannu Bhandari, Mridula Garg, Raji Seth and Chitra Mudgal among others who have traversed a parallel journey in Hindi literature. Each one of them has wanted to break the proverbial glass ceiling and have expressed their individual indignation about the public/private debate. Their original works have been in their mother tongue but translation has imparted the agency to come forward and represent a significant debate. It all began with Rassundari Debi (1800-1899) who was married at a nubile age of twelve, bore children and took care of her duties as a housewife till she was twenty-five and only after that she displayed immense tenacity when she wrote her own autobiography at the age of fifty going on to produce the first autobiography of a Bengali woman (Amar Jiban, 1868). It is an extraordinary work which records her struggles with reading, finding a book, teaching herself to read first and write much later. The book records her entire life in minute detail, exhibits her innate faith in God and documents her life in the confines of her own private world, a world of Hindu exclusion.

As Tanika Sarkar puts it:

Her writing and her life stand in a peculiarly significant relationship to each other, since the author Rassundari Debi, a housewife from an upper caste, landed family in East Bengal (now in Bangladesh) possessed none of the criteria that presumably render a woman's life noteworthy. (Sarkar, p.1)

It was the belief of unorthodox Hindus of those times that an educated woman invited the wrath of God and was fated to be a widow. Rassundari's autobiography is replete with instances of her fear of anyone finding out that she was trying to read. Yet she is shown to be transgressing this social code and her belief in her Dayamadhav takes her further on her path of educating herself against all odds. We must digress here to understand the public/social sphere of her times and her own 'domestic' space which she needed to negotiate all the time. The Dayabhaga school of Hindu law was prevalent in Bengal of those times according to which women neither inherited anything from their fathers nor had any share in their husband's property. (ibid. p.3) Rassundari's husband is educated and belonged to the affluent class but her position in the household was strangely paradoxical. She enjoyed no authority of any kind. In fact, throughout the narrative, she talks about the relentless heavy domestic labor she is occupied with single-handedly. She is like the poorest of the poor at times and has to starve for food because of the endless chores she does the whole day. Hence, we see her status aligned with the worst exploited economic category of the times. Life of a housewife in rural Bengal of the 19th century was bound in restrictions, both religious and social. She had to take a bath and then enter the kitchen, the household deity had to be washed, cleaned, prayed to before she got to cook. The children, her elders and her husband had to eat before she put a morsel of food in her mouth. She could not venture out of the inner courtyard and the kitchen, the maids were not allowed in the kitchen on the basis of their caste and as a mother of thirteen children, she had no time for herself and her basic needs. Irrespective of all these severely hard circumstances, she fulfils her desire to read and write. She has to say

a lot as we go through her writing. Simply written, it is a journal where she remembers her childhood, her early marriage and her household and family. She talks about the 19th century reforms initiated in Bengal and the strictures followed in orthodox families. She is always candid with her thoughts: "Why do you want to read when you know that is impossible?" (ibid. p.3) However, she possesses will power and makes a choice to gain agency. Her autonomous decision leads her into a 'space' she has created for herself. Her thoughts are her own and expressed only in her book. The woman in Rassundari's book is not bound by the spaces that the society has allotted to her that of a wife, a mother and a daughter-in-law. Here she is seen as a person who has created her own 'space'. It exists in her mind and she inhabits it. The woman's inner mind space, her internal psyche is seen in conflict and juxtaposition with the man's public space of the outer world in a number of other regional novels on the cusp of the twenty first century like Vasaveswaram by Kritika (2012), Karukku by Bama (2000), Breaking Ties by Sara Aboobacker (1999) and many others. The novel Vasaveswaram can be called a people's chronicle based in a village of the 1930's. The thematic concern of the public vs private space comes alive in the novel. Kritika, the novelist beautifully juxtaposes the public conflicts of the man's outer world and the private turmoil of the inner sanctum of the woman's mind. Bama's Karukku is about the self and the community as two forces opposing each other and the tensions caused by this confrontation. Bama is a lone woman fighting her battles of caste oppression caused by and within the Catholic church. It is the strong silent self against the rigid, orthodox institution. In the intervening 20th century, we have numerous works by women who stand out as writers powerfully expressing themselves in regional languages and portray this conflict of the public and the private spaces and what this conflict meant for the women. One anthology written between 1992-96, a collection of translated versions of selected prose writings by Anita Agnihotri stand apart from all other works. She was at the time, a young Bangla writer and also an IAS officer. She wrote this work in Bangla first and then got it translated into English to gain universal appeal. This collection which contains four short stories, some journals and a novella has a characteristic youthful tone of a woman who has an active public persona of an IAS officer and a private one of a wife and a mother. Forest Interludes presents a vividly touching portrayal of the sufferings of rural women in Bengal: they are responsible for multifarious tasks when it comes to paddy crops. Planting, weeding, cutting, winnowing and husking the grain, cutting wood for cooking, washing, cooking, feeding the children, feeding the men, climbing the hill slopes to separate the grasses, chopping the shrubs, lighting up fire in the bushes, putting in the seeds for cultivation and at night going to the tunnel for manual work...all in twenty-four hours. When they get back, most of them get beaten up by their drunk husbands and are forced to part with their meagre earnings to keep the household running. They each have a dual role of the wife and the caretaker on one hand and that of a breadwinner and a laborer on the other.

They cry with an anguished voice:

He comes home. He finds water ready and the rice served.
Has he ever fetched water? If you can get us a tube well, do it.
We will pump the water. Walking for wood and water for two
and a half kilometer is tearing the skin of our feet to shreds.
(Agnihotri, p.13)

The author herself is engaged in this struggle to understand the personal through the political and social and the social through the personal. The autobiographical novella Mahuldiha Days talks about the merging and stretching of these boundaries from one to the other and the pushing of these boundaries between the personal and the public, the emotional and the intellectual and the social and the

political. The narrative is a daily account of her own struggles within and outside of these spheres and dealing with conflicts in personal and professional relationships. She is constantly searching for resolutions and a higher degree of self-awareness. It is a young woman administrator's journey towards an idealistic space which will help her nourish and integrate her personal/ professional life. She is neither disillusioned nor disenchanted and makes no pretensions about who is to blame:

The finger always points back at the system to which she belongs, there is no other who exploits, who turns away with a shrug from hands pale, wrinkled and cracked from day long immersion in submerged paddy fields, bodies half-clothed, shrunken stomachs. (Agnihotri, p.43)

CONCLUSION

To conclude then, what we witness in all these works is a common strand of conflict and quest for a space she can call her own in this world which is both private and public, a small piece of her own mind that she can keep for herself and not have someone else impinge on it when she is unaware. Maybe a physical space for her to find herself in, amidst a hectic life shuttling between her home and the world. The search is limitless and timeless and understands the relationship between different literatures across the limitations of ethnic, religious and linguistic boundaries. The women writers express a strong urge to break open the barriers of the public and private worlds and in their works and their lives, inhabit a larger space.

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