

Indian Feminisms Concepts and Issues
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Lecture-13
Nationalism and the New Patriarchy

Hello everyone. In the previous lecture, we learned about how women's education served as a way to inculcate propriety and modesty among women. Such principles provided the basis for the feminine virtues suitable for the upper class and also upper caste bhadramahilas. The image of an ideal woman or bhadramahila as conceived by the nationalists was a curious mixture of the values of the West and the East.

In other words, a thoroughly westernized or downright traditional woman was not considered as an ideal woman in the 19th century. Therefore, a bhadramahila during the late 19th century was also expected to be subordinate to the bourgeois skills that she gained from formal education to her responsibility as a domestic woman. This is the precise method that went into the making of the new patriarchy without disturbing the core elements of home, world, man, woman, material, spiritual and other such binaries.

The new woman as a representative of the new patriarchy was given constrained freedom. The condition under, which she was allowed to get an education and sometimes restricted mobility was patriarchal control. Her so-called freedom was initiated and controlled solely by the husband or the father. And this is how nationalism resolved the question of women by transforming patriarchy to suit the need of the changing times.

In order to do so the nationalists face two challenges. First, to avoid being called the mere copies of western modes and manners and second, to uphold something truly Indian, nationalism glorified India's past and tried to defend everything traditional. All attempts to change customs and lifestyles began to be seen as the aping of western manners and thereby was regarded with suspicion.

We have seen in the previous lecture, how Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay and Kundamala Devi cautioned women not to fall into the trap of becoming a degenerate western woman who, indulges solely in material satisfaction and does not look after the family or the household. If

you have any doubts regarding the lecture, you can go back and watch the video once again. Now, in this lecture we are going to talk about the specific binarisms of public and private material and spiritual, home and world that underlie the construction of the new woman.

We have already seen in the case of education of new women, how it retained the patriarchal norms of the household. We have also given examples from Rassundari Devi's autobiography, *Aamar Jiban* and Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire* to see the changing perceptions of women's education. *Ghare Baire* becomes an interesting example because we see that as long as Vimla listens to her husband and learns things only prescribed by him.

She is fine. The moment she starts thinking about, what she has learned and starts talking about them and taking decisions on her own calamity falls and her family disintegrates. Such examples, also serve as cautionary nodes to prevent any such mishap from happening. The underlying fear of women's emancipation and potential independence, continue to fester in the nationalist endeavour.

Partha Chatterjee in his article, the nationalist resolution of the women's question, writes that the premise of nationalist resolution discourse was the following. He writes the discourse of nationalism shows that the material, spiritual distinction was condensed into an analogous, but ideologically far more powerful, dichotomy: that between the outer and the inner. The material domain 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, which is our true self; it is that which is genuinely essential. This internal and external was neatly divided into *ghar* and *bahir* the home and the world. A combination of phrases Tagore uses in his novel. The world is the external, the domain of the material and the home represents our inner spiritual self our true identity. Since, the world was already apparently contaminated by the material aspects.

It was the home, which needed to be kept intact it was the inner sanctum, the spiritual realm that was untouched by the western influence. In order to imprint this idea in the minds of women the 19th century saw a huge growth in terms of writings, to teach women what was the appropriate form of behaviour. There are innumerable examples, from moral essays, to novels, farces, skits, paintings, oral and visual communications.

These teachings took root in all spheres writers such as Ishwar Chandra Gupta, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Dinabandhu Mitra, Jyotirindranath Tagore, Upendranath Das, Amrital Bose all of them wrote social parodies to ridicule the idea of a Bengali woman trying to imitate the ways of a European woman, who is also known as memsahib. In a play titled Maja or Fun, Amarendranath Dutta writes about a conversation between a father and his anglicized daughter in the following manner.

PHULKUMARI: Papa! Papa! I want to go to the races, please take me with you.

DHURANDHAR: Finished with your tennis?

PHULKUMARI: Yes. Now, I want to go to the races. And you have to get me a new bicycle. I would not ride the one you got me last year. And my football is torn: you have to get me another one.

DHURANDHAR: Nothing else? How about asking the Banerjee Company to rebuild this house upside down, ceiling at the bottom and floor on top?

PHULKUMARI: How can that be papa? You cannot give me an education and then expect me to have low tastes?

Now along with the very mundane use of the names the conversation highlights the daughter's materialistic mindset. The conversation emerges to be absolutely fruitless and mired in the commonality. This is a complete contrast to the spirituality and depth promoted for women in the Indian culture.

Phulkumari does not possess any of the so-called higher qualities of nurture and care, which are considered to be intrinsic for the Indian woman who is capable of upholding Indian culture. Another case worth mentioning at this juncture is the dress of the bhadramahila, which went through a series of experimentations before that known as brahmika sari. Brahmika sari also became the standard dress code for a middle-class woman.

Traditionally the Hindu upper-caste bhadramahila in Bengal used to wear a fine transparent saree. It was a single piece of cloth draped around the body; no undergarments were worn. This dress was suitable for a tropical climate of the region. But, the bhadramahila who wore such transparent clothes, which barely covered their body, was not acceptable to the 19th century educated middle class men.

Because, the position of women was an additional means of determining their social status. Therefore, attempts were made to redesign the dress code of the bhadramahila. Though, the gown worn by western women was a perfect choice to overcome this issue a blind imitation of the western dress was not at all considered an acceptable option. If Indians imitate the west it would appear as a futile attempt, which merely avoids one's own faults, to embrace their deficiencies.

Now, European clothes were understood as a betrayal of the national identity. And these Indian women were supposed to adorn themselves in a kind of dressing that was culturally appropriate sartorial cot. It was widely believed that it is never as enjoyable to imitate clothes of other nations as to create clothing from one's imagination, which is suited to both national characteristics and is also civilized in nature.

While, designing the new attire it was also important to make sure that it should not resemble the attire of a sex worker, who also wears a sari, jacket and a pair of shoes. In order to avoid the resemblance with the sex worker's dress code, it was decided, that a bhadramahila's respectable position in the society would be maintained by wearing an additional Chadar or wrap covering her from head to foot.

Considering all these factors, the final recommendation for the reformed dress was made. At home: ijar or short trousers, piran or blouse and sari or long piran and sari outside: ijar, piran and sari, chadar, pajama and shoes are optional. Now, the ever-mentioned attire projects the national characteristic and was devoid of the major problems associated with muslin sarees used earlier. Nevertheless, it was bereft of one pertinent aspect, a distinct Bengali identity.

Thus, the sartorial codes of bhadramahila once again underwent a transformation. Later, a new dress code that drew inspiration from diverse groups including the English, Muslims and Bengalis was suggested, which would provide a distinct regional identity to the attire. The particulars of the attire included shoes, stockings, bodice angiya kacali, blouse or jama and a short skirt or ghaghara or ijar with a sari over the top at home and chadar to cover the head.

While, going out this style came to be known as the brahmika sari. Initially, the bhadramahila who belonged to the brahmo community in Bengal started following this dress code. Even

though, there was much deliberation after the inception of brahmika sari regarding the usage of shoes and also stockings in a tropical climate. Eventually, the attire was adopted and accepted by all the middle-class women.

Brahmika sari was the confluence of both the traditional and the western guard as the blind imitation of the western dress would not be an ideal or appropriate factor for the nationalist elites, who were in pursuit to build an indigenous modernity. The middle class intelligentsia, who set out to reform the society and their women was in a pursuit to fashion and attire, which is suited to both national and national characteristics and also civilized in nature.

Dressed form thus the bhadramahila can also be understood as an answer to the colonizers, who branded India to be archaic. Especially, with reference to the women's question. As the body and sartorial codes, were understood as vehicles, which is capable of satisfying or signifying a moral and historical stage of social development, it was imperative to refashion the existing sartorial and other moral codes to project a civilized Indian society of which reformation of women was a specific tool.

Now, we have to remember that the nationalist project resolved the women's question by reorienting the everyday life of women. The new woman as we have already seen, was placed in stark contrast to the western woman. This modern or new woman was also explicitly distinguished from the common woman. In an earlier lecture, I have mentioned that the new patriarchy completely discarded the common folk forms such as kirtans and so on, which they deemed to be vulgar and coarse.

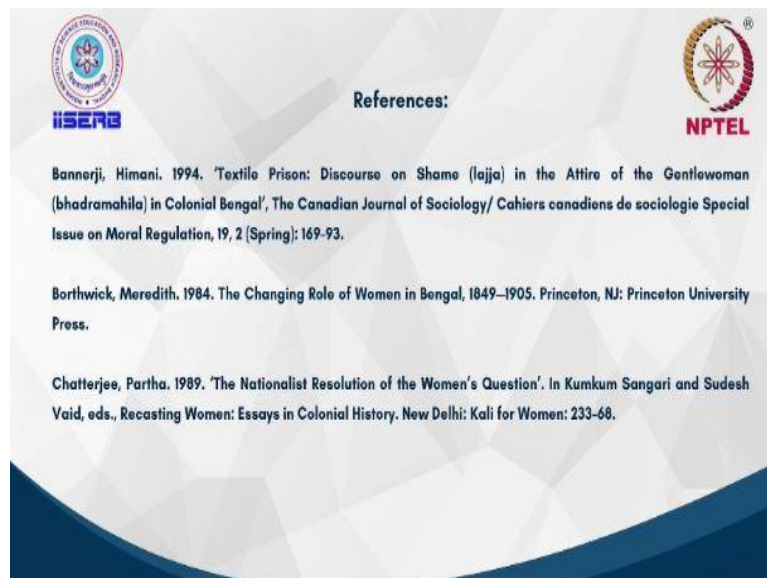
In fact, as Partha Chatterjee mentions, the new woman was quite the reverse of the common woman who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males. In order to avoid such predicament education became almost a requirement for the new bhadramahila. It was assumed that only through modern education women could acquire the cultural refinements afforded without jeopardizing her place at home.

As a result, many middle- and upper-class women enthusiastically opted for it. What we can deduce from such practice is? That the new nation was necessarily modeled and shaped for the middle and upper class, upper caste women. Especially, ones who were Hindu. we will discuss

the significance of such articulation in the next lecture. Now, let us briefly summarize today's lecture. In this lecture, we learned about the conditions that went into the making of the new woman, aside from education as one of the major parameters that decided the contours of this identity.

We have also seen the ways in which morality was dictated through pamphlets, satires, clothing and so on. This in turn created a distinction between middle- and upper-class women and lower-class women. However, you need to remember that this distinction was not just in terms of class. There were also distinctions in terms of religion caste and so on. In the next lectures we will take up issues to see how this nationalist construction of Indian woman was not a homogeneous one, it was actually diversified. Thank you.

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References:

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