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The Interface between Colonialism and Gender Representations

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Abstract:

Colonial discourses are a system of statements made about colonies, canonized people and colonizing powers. It considers the East ‘the other’ of the West. The ‘others’ of India is explicatively manifested in the image of the Indian Women. Indian Women in imperial discourses are typically represented as both dangerous and attractive. Gender formed one of the pillars on which imperialism was built: and the division of gender mediated the structure of imperialism. This paper elucidates imperial representations of Indian Womanhood.

Keywords: Colonizer- colonized – othering- race and gender.

“I will take some savage woman, she shall rear my dusky race”

(Tennyson, *Locksley Hall*).

Tennyson through this line portrays the fantasy of colonial discourse that considers the East as the “other” of the West. In this characteristic, ambivalent movement of attraction and repulsion, we encounter the sexual economy of desire in fantasies of race and race in fantasies of desire. As a result, no analysis of the relationship between the East and West can take place without reference to the politics of Gender and colonial discursive praxis.

Imperialism plays a significant role in comprehending the contexts by which political, economic and social structures encounter with cultures and people. It also helps in understanding the imbalance of power that defines the contact between the East and West. It is also the context in which ‘knowledge’ emerged and explained Eastern reality to the West and in which these countries found a place in the international systems of power. Robert Young has

rightly remarked that “history lives on.... its effects are operating now” (75). The contemporary agendas for debates for development and progress can be viewed as manifestations of this struggle.

One of the most important aspects of any relationship that is defined by a significant imbalance of power is how the narrative of one is given legitimacy over the other. The possession of greater power generally invests the knowledge of the more powerful with greater authority than those of the powerless, and the authority facilitates the creation of a universalized image of both the powerful and powerless. Edward Said’s litmus and path-breaking masterpiece *Orientalism* identifies such an exercise of power in the context of Imperialism as Orientalism –an approach that enabled the West to come to terms with the East and at the same time to construct the West’s identity in contrast or opposition to the East. The key to Said’s way of knowing Europe’s ‘Other’ is that it effectively demonstrates the link between knowledge and power, for it “constructs and dominates” (Said 27). What Said desires is to discern the way in which cultural hegemony is maintained, thereby, stimulating “a new kind of dealing with the Orient” (Said 28). Indeed, if this binary between ‘Orient’ and “Occident” were to disappear altogether, we shall have advanced a little in what Raymond Williams calls the “unlearning” of the inherent dominative mode” (Said 28).

Orientalism is best viewed in Foucauldian terms as discourse, a manifestation of power/knowledge. Without examining Orientalism as a ‘structure’ says Said, it is impossible to understand ‘the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture as able to manage and even produce the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-enlightenment period” (Said 3). Orientalism, thus, becomes a discourse of power that attempts to project the Orient as a foil to the Occident.

A discourse is a system of statements within which and by which the world can be known. It is a process of constructing subjectivity. It is thus, a complex of signs and social reproductions, which determine how experiences and identities are categorized. Colonial discourse is, thus, a system of statements made about colonies and colonized people, about colonizing powers and about the relationship between these two. Employing this discourse, Said argues that Western cultural institutions are responsible for the creation of those “Others”, the Orientals whose very difference from the Occident helps to establish that binary opposition by

which Europe's identity can be established. The underpinning of such a demarcation is a line between the Orient and Occident that is "less a fact of nature than it is a fact of human productions" (Said 2). The creation of the Orient is necessary so that the Occident can define itself by involving such juxtaposition. To the Westerner, Said comments, "the Oriental was always like some aspects of the West to some general Romantics, for example, Indian religion was essentially an oriental version of Germano - Christian pantheism" (Said 67). As a result, both the Orient and Occident are subjectified, leading to the assumption that the Orient is monolithic with an unchanging history while the occident is dynamic with an active history, historians, novelists, linguists, travelers, administrators and others who cooperated in the creation of such an image of the East. The political and material resources made this available to them with the Colonial contest. The West always considered themselves superior to the East in power, culture, civilization, religion, etc. The prominent feature that differentiated the East and West was the imbalance of power. The imbalance of power affected and continues to affect the representation of the Orient even today. It is in representations embodied in language, knowledge is constructed. "Representations" as Said contents are " eo-ipso implicated, intertwined, embodied, interwoven with a great many other things besides the Truth which is itself a representation "(Said 272).

The representation of Indian women as 'oriental other' in colonial discourse has increasingly become a hard nut to crack, especially in the field of social history and cultural studies where "wide-ranging questions of gender, ethnicity and empire are increasingly being addressed" (Chaudhari 22). Much of these engagements have been in the area of the politics of gender representations and the location within the intricacies of colonial power structures.

In *Orientalism*, Said claims that European culture has grown in strength and identity by setting itself off against an oriental other. The construction of European and British identities for self –representation is everywhere implied in the portrayal of India. Orientalism produces an unshakable assumption of European superiority; with the East always functioning as the West's negative foil. Though the process of empire and the colonial enterprise contributed in complex ways to sharpening the cultural devaluation and narratives of national identity, they are ever haunted by new anxieties and instabilities. According to Suleri, "the anxiety of empire manifests

itself everywhere, in the imperial attempt to classify the people in India in homoerotic narratives of Colonial encounter and the idiom of cultural migrancy” (4).

India is frequently depicted as the antithesis, occasionally as analogue, of Europe. The ‘otherness’ of India is more explicitly manifested in the image of Indian women. Indian women in imperial discourses are typically represented as both dangerous and attractive. Consequently, the India of the Colonial perspective has become the kind of space described by G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter:

Containing an element of the forbidden, though without its co-relate, the abominable, the exotic is the realm of the excluded which is not absolutely prohibited, but merely signposted by danger lights. It has equivalent status in the geo-cultural realms to the daydream in the psychodynamics. It is marked by frisson more than fear (208).

What ‘sells a country like India to the West is its exotic culture and poverty. In her exoticism and her misery, the Indian woman embodies the subcontinent itself; attracting and repelling at the same time, she is as absent in the construction of her image as India has been. As Said remarks, “in discussions of the Orient, the Orient is all absence, whereas one feels, the orientalist and what he says as presence” (208).

In fact, gender formed one of the pillars on which imperialism was built; and the division of gender mediated the structure of imperialism. It is located as socially constructed, created by men as well as women, embracing contradictions and complexities with women becoming simultaneously both victims and agents. Thus, the social construction of male-female sexuality is viewed as contributing to masculine sexual aggression, power and domination as opposed to female passivity, powerlessness and subordination. Thus, Rev. John Sprint’s ‘wedding Sermon’ on the duties of a wife justifies female subordination in marriage and suggests that wives should follow the practice of “Persian ladies who have the resemblance of a foot-worn on top of her coronets” to show that “the height of glory, top-knot and all do stoop to husbands feet” (526.).

Much of the colonial discourse on India had been preoccupied with the question of Indian woman’s virtue or vice, their chastity and wifely subordination. The British often suspected that Indians were by nature lascivious that they themselves. Child marriage and polygamy practiced in India adequately proved their argument. Though, such assumptions were formed by the

Orient to inculcate in their children loyalty and other essential virtues, the Indian women, whose home was the hearth were jolted and perplexed by the indecorous behavior of British ladies baring their shoulders and even dancing on social occasions in the public with strange folk. Such behaviour, however, never permitted the Indian women to loosen their restraints on caste or abandon their traditional seclusion of respectable women. In fact, the Victorian doctrine of ‘separate spheres, located domesticity and the home as the women’s realm where she could remain “protected from all dangers and temptations and the world outside the combative arena of man” (Sen 2). The home was, thus, visualized both as an area of protection from external dangers and as a space containing female sexuality.

It is a well-known fact that both the colonizer and the colonized used the image of the Indian woman and the notion of Indian tradition in relation to gender to contain political and cultural changes both in Britain and India. Although men largely constructed this orientalist discourse, Western women also contributed to it. According to Sara Mills, “their voice was distinctive, lacking the authority of the male colonizer” and therefore “not straightforwardly Orientalist in the way Said has described it” (62). Feminist scholars have helped in discovering the ways in which imperialism operated by constructing discursive positions for its subjects and worked to suppress the voice of colonized people. The scholarships on ‘Gender as Empire’ have always privileged European women and slighted indigenous women. Such writings also claim that European women, although, subordinated by patriarchy to the rule of European men, are less racist and more sympathetic than their men to the colonized. Many of the texts produced by writers like Flora Shaw who wrote for *The Times*, painted the Indian women as pathetic, oppressed and victimized.

Gender is recognized by the imperial rulers as “a foundational dynamic that shaped all aspects of the empire from the conduct of war to the drafting of statutes and regularities to social and medical codes governing sexuality, to stories that appeared in *The Times* and juvenile fictions” (Woollacott 3). Gender is a shaping force in the episodes and topics central to the mainstream history of the British Empire. This concept embraces political, economic and cultural dynamics that cut across the diversity of colonies providing structural connections among the European empires. The European colonizers were cast in gendered terms in their

relations with colonized others, while the colonized were portrayed as sensual, childlike and irresponsible and hence were feminized.

The occident looked upon the Indian women as their special burden and considered themselves their agents of progress and civilization. The subject, the Indian woman, in a decaying colonized society was the model of everything they struggled against and was thus, the measure and the yardstick of Western feminists' own progress. In fact, masculine resistance to first-wave feminist movements led some Europeans to decry modern European women as unsexed and looked at the colonized women as more passive, feminine and as the exotic repository of traditional gender relations. Thus, the Oriental women came to be re-inscribed and reconstructed in the service of colonizers. Modernity and nations were figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space. Within this space, women had been represented as “the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition” (Mc Clintock 102).

The Europeans looked at India as a virgin and untouched land that resembled a woman waiting to be deflowered by the white conquerors. Writers frequently categorized Indian women according to their religious affiliations; placing Hind and Muslim women in complementary opposites. As a result, the sequestered, jealously guarded women in yashmaks are set against the Hindu women who are ostentatiously bejeweled and freely on show. John Fryer remarks, “the Moors wives were cloistered from the sight of any besides the capon that watched them. Whereas the Hindu women are manacled with chains of silver” (88). The Hindu women are obviously being defined in contrast to the Muslim. She is represented as sexually always available. European travel accounts on Indian women do mention about the practice of using artificial things by women, especially the Hindu women, to quench their sexual cravings. Many of the Europeans who were long absent from their wives often visited these women and harems to gratify their sexual appetite. Female sexuality often came to be identified with the lower class women. Prostitutes, drawn generally from the deprived sections of society, and very often from the domestic servant class, had been represented as living symbols of class and sexual exploitations. Ranna Kabbani remarks that “by“the Renaissance the luxurious harems had already become standard topos for European writing about the East” (18). The construction of harem women parallels the sexually frustrated European widow. Both types are indebted to anti-

feminist arguments, which see the proof of feminine frailty and imperfection in the triumph of sensuality over reason.

The Western description of Indian women pictures them, especially the Hindu women, as dangerously exciting, attracted to Europeans, available on their wedding nights and involved in occult sexual practices and even to the extent of copulating with the devil. This image makes India a perfect setting for pornographic literature. Thus the Indian women become the focus of the male European gaze, fears and desires; a body to be veiled, revealed, or consummated in flames. We can discern an intrinsic link between the enterprise of empire in the Colonial days and the growth of an ideology about women.

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