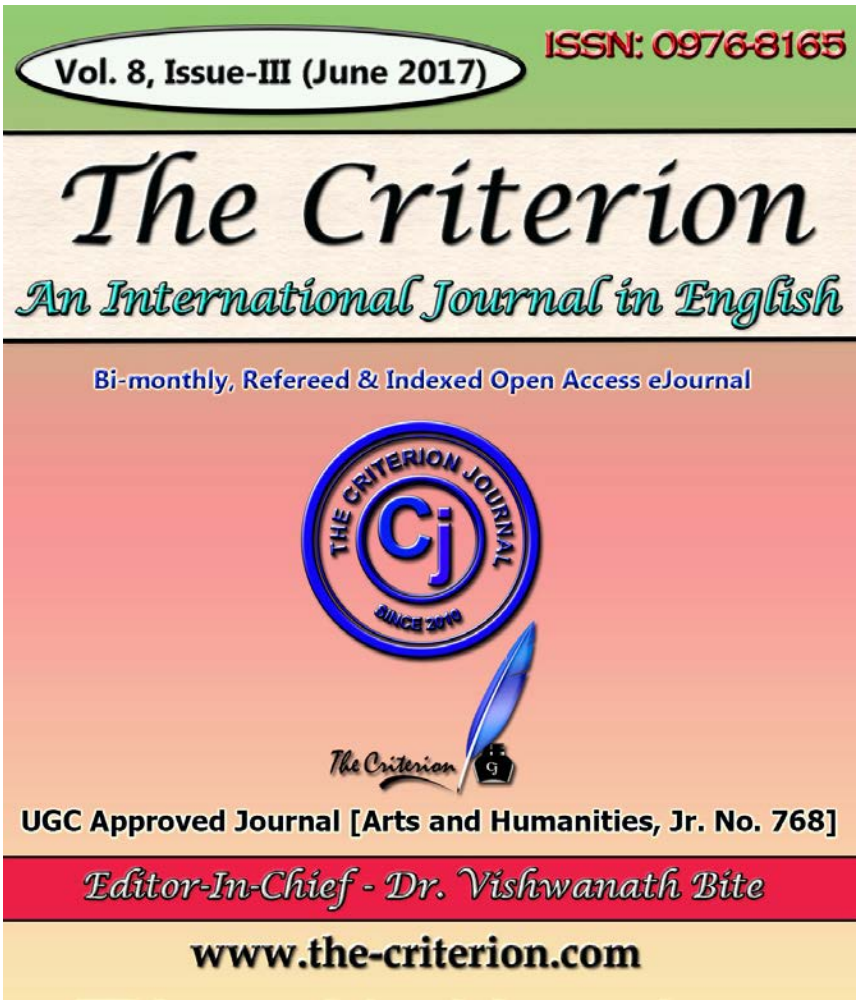

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Words as Weapon: Tarabai Shinde's *Stri Purush Tulana* and Gender Politics in Nineteenth Century India

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Abstract:

In the contestation between patriarchal orthodoxy and reform, the association of religion with the deplorable condition of women has undeniably remained central to the debate. Nineteenth-century India in particular, was one such battleground where voices demanding reform strongly rose against socio-religious practices that were explicitly responsible for the victimization of women. Apart from their male counterparts, many women reformers also posed serious opposition to the then existing patriarchal norms of the society through their writings as well as their activism. Their writings, in particular, contested gender hierarchies and women's reforms during the nineteenth century. The present paper attempts to expose the defiance of constructed feminine identity by one such strong feminist voice of nineteenth century India — Tarabai Shinde. The text under examination in the present study is Shinde's *Stri Purush Tulana*. In the analysis of this text, the tripartite rhetoric of religious sanctions, women's reform and patriarchy will serve as the conflict-ridden site of investigation.

Keywords: Nineteenth century India, women's reform, patriarchy, religion, female sexuality, masculinity.

The nineteenth century Indian society was witness to contestation between patriarchal orthodoxy and forces spearheading socio-religious reform. The association of religion and women was undeniably central to such debates. Voices demanding reform strongly rose against socio-religious practices that were explicitly responsible for the deplorable condition of women. There was a consensus among reformers to advocate women's empowerment and education, and abolish corrupt socio-religious practices. These socio-religious reforms however, were not accepted as essentially pro-women in an unproblematic way. Many women registered their protest and posed serious opposition to the then existing patriarchal norms of the society through their writings as well as their activism. Their writings, in particular, contested women's reforms, gender hierarchies and corrupt religious customs during the nineteenth century and had far reaching effects in the recasting of notions of patriarchy, the nation and the self (both female and male). The present paper attempts to expose the defiance of constructed feminine identity by one such strong feminist voice of nineteenth century India — Tarabai Shinde. The texts under examination in the present study is Shinde's *Stri Purush Tulana*. Within the three-fold agenda of the paper, the prime

contention would be firstly, to study the text under investigation and recognise its contestation against religion sanctioned hierarchies of gender. Secondly, the paper will juxtapose reformatory efforts of those who challenged the dominant socio-religious order against exertions of the revivalist and conservative factions to oppose voices like Shinde. Thirdly, taking into account the women's reform movement, the paper will analyse the simultaneous remodelling of the semiotics of native femininity, masculinity and patriarchy within colonial India. Consequently, the tripartite rhetoric of religious sanctions, women's reform and patriarchy will serve as the conflict-ridden site of investigation.

The nineteenth century was a period of significant changes in the socio-political landscape of the nation. It was a period that witnessed the emergence of the Indian bourgeoisie. Establishing itself steadily upon the relics of a declining aristocracy, this educated, upwardly mobile class soon gained prominence within the social, political, economic and religious functioning of the nation. In the process of creating a distinct identity for itself, the new Indian middle class was all set to shed of all elements of a primitive identity and redefine its public and private spheres under the influence of the cultural hegemony entailing the British encounter. As a result, socio-religious reforms and the project of empowerment of women were seen as potent tools for the facelift necessary for indigenous patriarchy. Socio-religious practices like child marriage were contested; issues of widow remarriage debated and laws were passed for the betterment of the lives of women. In addition, women education was promoted and various schools and colleges were exclusively started for them. Despite this apparent vigour surrounding the movement towards reform, the project was skewed in its vision. Interestingly, while reformers were striding towards modernity and women empowerment, they simultaneously associated women with the ideas of tradition, home and purity. While on the one hand, they fought against customs and traditions sanctioned by religion, on the other hand, they found the same religious legacy as a viable tool to glorify and create the image of the ideal domesticated Indian woman. The dependence on religion in secular matters of reform was indisputably contentious. From matters of social organization, political and legal setup to matters related to home and domesticity, the reformers traced a legacy of scriptural prescriptions for everything. These prescriptions were more often than not, androcentric. As a result, reform only meant a continuation of women's marginalization in every sphere — political, economic, social, domestic and legal. The reformers' adherence to such a biased ideology led women like Tarabai Shinde to register their discontent against the hypocrisy of the reform discourse in general, and the religious and patriarchal orthodoxy at large.

Tarabai belonged to one of the elite families of Buldhana in the Berar district of present day Maharashtra. Her father, Bapuji Hari Shinde, worked as a head clerk in the office of the Deputy Commissioner. The only daughter in the family, Tarabai at an early age, came under the influence of the Satyashodhak Samaj, a reformist and anti-Brahmin society set up in 1873 by Jotirao Phule. As a consequence of her father's reformist bent and Phule's close ties with the family, she was encouraged to learn to read and write Marathi, English and Sanskrit. This allowed her to explore the world for herself and develop the courage to speak against injustice. In 1882, Tarabai published her essay *Stri-Purush Tulna* (*A Comparison*

between Women and Men). In her essay she courageously exposed the patriarchy driven psychology and Brahamanical mythology governing the lives of women. She ridiculed men and reformers, in particular, who use the scriptures to justify male superiority. By foregrounding the hypocrisy of the empty reformatory rhetoric she highlighted the gulf between precept and practice. Her essay was a result of the case against Vijayalaxmi, a Brahmin widow of 24. Belonging to the small village of Olpad (Gujarat), Vijayalaxmi was charged of infanticide and sentenced to death by the local session's judge in 1881. Like most women of the nineteenth century, Vijayalaxmi was a victim of child marriage and early widowhood. The news of her pregnancy, followed by her committing infanticide, became the focus of a violent public debate. While this case stirred reactions on the moral conduct of women from all sections of the society, Tarabai Shinde was prompted to pen down a furious rebuttal arguing in favour of women.

Vijayalaxmi's infanticide trial in 1881 in Surat was one of the many instances where a woman had become a victim to the dominant patriarchal logic of honour and morality. As in most religions and cultures all over the world, the discourse of sexuality within the Indian culture valorises the sexuality of men while female sexuality is seen as a threat to social order. A woman or her sexuality is recognized both as *sakti* or the energizing principle of the universe, as well as, *prakriti* or the undifferentiated matter that constitutes the universe. Being a combination of power and nature, women and their sexuality become synonymous to untamed energy and are therefore seen as dangerous. This untamed energy by implication is then seen as potentially dangerous for the androcentric social order. It is due to such an understanding of women's sexuality that controlling it has been the paramount concern within the Indian culture. This control over women and their sexuality has been justified by arguing that their inherent nature makes control as well as their social exclusion a necessity. The *Manusmriti* states in this regard that,

> Through their passion for men, through their mutable temper, through their natural heartlessness, they become disloyal towards their husbands, however carefully they may be guarded in this world. (Buhler, 9.15)
>
> Knowing their disposition, which the Lord of creatures laid in them at the creation, to be such, (every) man should most strenuously exert himself to guard them. (Buhler, 9.16)

Consequently, various socio-religious discourses and institutions are created in order to curb the expression of female sexuality and burden women with notions of purity, chastity and honour. The society's recourse to religious scriptures is crucial in this regard. Indian scriptures are abundant in accounts pertaining to the discourse of sexuality. There are myths that explicate the importance of women's honour and chastity, the rewards these virtues bring to the women who abide by them and the punishment suffered by those who transgress. Since childhood, these stories are told and retold to teach women that they are the honour of the family and hence they ought to safeguard themselves and maintain their purity. A woman ought to be chaste before her marriage and remain faithful to her husband after her marriage

in this life and beyond. The importance of premarital chastity and post marital fidelity is often elucidated through myths and legends. The myth of *Arundhati*,[1] for instance, establishes the importance of premarital female chastity and warns against the devastating circumstances that follow its abandonment. Yet another mythical instance where the violation of premarital chastity was punished is that of *Kunti*,[2] the mother of the *Pandavas*. In a similar way, instances of chaste married women also form part of legends and epics. Through these stories the discourse of premarital purity and chastity is carried forward in the notion of the *pativrata* — the quality of a virtuous woman who stays faithful to her husband in life and death. Sustaining and strengthening this transformed and upgraded version of purity, a scriptural verse states that,

Ahalya, Draupadi, Sita, Tara, Mandodari tatha

Panchkanyam smarennityam sarva papa vinaashanam (Ramaswamy 17)

The verse explicates that by remembering these five women, namely, *Ahalya, Draupadi, Sita, Tara* and *Mandodari*, all sins are destroyed. The Indian epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* speak highly of their virtues, moral strength and sacrifices. The example of these five women and the legends of their life and character are time and again used to instil the spirit of service and dedication in women towards one's husband.[3] This dominance of scriptural and Brahmin culture forced people to ensure early marriage of girls. It was propagated child marriages would ensure that, the "girls would already be the sexual property of their husbands at the time of puberty. All sexual activity would then be exclusively concentrated upon the husband and there would be less possibility of women going 'astray'. Immediately after puberty… the *garbhadharnam* ceremony would be performed, thus harnessing female sexuality for the sole purpose of ensuring legitimate reproduction" (Chakravarti 19). Scriptures, as a result, provide the readers with an androcentric view in which women should experience their sexuality. These legends as well as legendary women thus, serve as models for the society. It would not be an exaggeration to say that scriptures provide an unreal model to judge real women. But what aggravates the situation all the more is when the moral and sexual conduct of one woman is not only seen through the scriptural prism but is exaggeratingly amplified and generalized to reflect the moral health of the entire society. Vijayalakshmi's case was one such instance; and Tarabai's *Stri-Purush Tulana* was one rare response in favour of women.

Sexuality of women has always been closely monitored by the self-conscious protectors of tradition. Thus institutional structures of family and marriage are put in place for propagating legitimate reproduction and the effective functioning of patriarchy. But often these institutional structures fail to prevent sexual offences by (and against) women and particularly by widows. According to Daniel J.R. Grey Vijayalakshmi's trial "sparked heated debate about the most appropriate judicial treatment of infanticide and the broader social and cultural position of women in India…Crucially, Vijayalakshmi's case was not one of those perennially reported instances where the sex of the infant was a factor. Rather, the killing had resulted from the fact that as a Hindu widow (already stigmatized as a bringer of misfortune) she was expected by her community to remain chaste and subject to strict rules of behaviour until her own death" (37). Unfortunately, these codes were breached by Vijayalakshmi. She had broken the vows of chaste dedication towards her husband, faltered from her *dharma*,

and failed to qualify as a true *pativrata*. In other words, she had transgressed the *stridharma* or duties of a woman that the scriptures and the society deemed necessary for women. In such instances, women are subjected to the severest condemnation as well as public and personal measures of punishment. Such punishments not only punish the offender, but also serve as a deterrent for the rest. Vijayalakshmi's execution was one of the many instances of this nature.

Writing in the context of Vijayalakshmi's case, in particular, and of women's condition in general, Tarabai's questioning of society's ambiguous stance regarding female sexuality is quite evident in her treatise. The disparity on the issue of separate sets of *dharma* for men and women is questioned by Tarabai at the onset of the essay. She puts forth two basic questions that constitute the broad ambit in which a majority of her argument can be located. Firstly — are all rules meant for women? And secondly — "what does *stridharma* really mean?" (trans. O'Hanlon 79). Questioning if *dharma* was meant solely for women to abide by, Tarabai passionately puts forth her views on the hypocrisy that the Indian society displays in its biased definitions and selective application of notions of right and wrong while dealing with matters of the duties of men and women. Her expression of the "upper-caste women's subaltern consciousness, of being subjected to the most coercive patriarchal norms and practices" is evident in her critique of the scriptures (Kosambi 4).

Drawing examples from mythology, Tarabai exposes the hypocrisy inherent in the notion of the *pativrata*. She asserts her disapproval of the writers of *shastras*, *puranas* and all other scriptures, as well as, detests reformers who quote scriptural examples of great women and revered *pativratas*. Her exposé of patriarchal hypocrisy rests on the inherent inconsistencies within scriptures. Tarabai mentions Draupadi, who had five husbands and yet never stopped secretly lusting for Karna. Ahilya was caught with Indra by her husband and yet considered divine. Similarly, Satyavati and Kunti were supposed to be virgins and *pativratas*, yet begot sons from gods and sages. Tara, the wife of Vali, has a similar story. When Lord Rama killed her husband Vali, he asks her to marry her brother-in-law Sugriva. Lord Rama assures her that even after marrying Sugriva, she would be numbered among the *pativratas*. Ravana's wife Mandodari too had to give a proof of her loyalty towards her husband. When Ravana abducted Sita, he went to his wife and told her that since she was a great *pativrata*, she should go and persuade Sita to marry Ravana. According to Gail Omvedt, Tarabai "could not see rishis and gods as symbols of divinity without accepting her own position as an inferior" (30). Being a member of the Satyashodhak Samaj, she shared with prominent Dalit leaders of her times like Phule, hostility towards Brahminic orthodoxy. The difference being that while the Dalit leaders viewed the Brahminic religion as an oppressor of the lower castes, Tarabai viewed it as a male-centric oppressor of women. Considering Tarabai's analysis of the legendary instances of chastity and sexual transgression, some serious questions are raised regarding the notion of female chastity and purity professed by the andro-normative scriptures. It is pertinent to mention here that control over women and their sexuality has been justified by arguing that their inherent nature makes control as well as their social exclusion a necessity.

In addition, not only are women seen as an embodiment of domestic life, they are also perceived as an index of tradition itself. Their virtues are seen as a measure of ancient civilizational strength. Consequently, the moral negligence of one is generalized to reflect the moral health of the entire society. It also becomes quite clear from the above observation that the Hindu notions of gender and sexuality are neither simple nor static. Similar to other aspects of Hinduism, their complexity and contradictions are equally evident. In the myths related to Krishna and his beloved Radha, for instance, the norms of sexual behaviour are abandoned. Krishna is in love with the married Radha, and she too is unable to part with Krishna. Sexuality in this case is presented as a metaphor of Radha's devotion towards Krishna that transcends human rules. Thus the rules of the *pativrata* are flouted as per the convenience of the male-dominant legendary narratives that subsequently have shaped the understanding of sexuality of the masses and have become permanently engrained within the collective unconscious.

Seeing the glaring flexibility of the 'divine' rules of *pativrata* and sexual expression, Tarabai critiques the gender hierarchy prevalent in two core components of an individual's public and private identity in India — marriage and sexual expression. These two spheres in the Indian society have always remained conflict ridden territories in terms of their inherent power imbalance. As an extension to the questions earlier posed by Tarabai, the strategically advantageous stature exercised by men in such matters and its misuse by men in comparison to women is vital to Tarabai's argument. In Tarabai's opinion, *dharam,* or rules for social propriety, seems to be solely defined for women. This implies that the proper functioning of the society is apparently seen as dependent on women's behaviour and their adherence to *dharma*. In addition, the duty of a woman or *stridharama* is defined by scriptures as in terms of the notion of *pativrata*. This implies that the foremost duty of a woman is to obey "orders from your husband and doing everything he wants" (O'Hanlon 79). Giving strength to this ideology the *Manusmriti* states in this regard:

> Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure [elsewhere], or devoid of good qualities, [yet] a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife. (trans. Buhler 5.154)

Scriptures and legends thus bind women's sexuality with discourses of duty, purity and chastity while men, on the contrary, may treat his women as they please. As a husband, a man may abuse her, beat her and swear at her, but it is a woman's *dharma* to treat him like a God and behave like the *pativrata* Savitri. The substantial stress on purity and *pativrata* in legends of iconic women also bring to fore the importance attributed to marriage as a means of controlling a woman's sexuality. According to David Smith, while in the traditional brahmanic culture, men enjoy four life stages of life (student, householder, forest dweller, wandering ascetic) woman seem to has only two — girlhood and marriage (108). It is also interesting to note that while the Hindu mythology mentions Goddesses as all-powerful, (and at times even dangerous) their energies are subdued to a great degree by their marriage. In Mrinal Pande's opinion "Goddesses are presented through word and image as overdressed, bejewelled and fawning mothers, givers of wealth and gentle imposers of discipline. Those unpredictable outbursts of temper, that fury of wild hair, those rolling eyes, the lolling tongue and other manifestations of an inexplicably complex presence, are all being erased from

Goddess-lore" (Pande xxii). In other words, by creating knowledge of the docile married goddess, the wild is kept in check; for the mild and controlled suits best to the working of the male-order, as opposed to the wild and uncontrolled. Thus scriptures act as a hegemonic authority that instructs women to lead a life of submission while strengthening and deifying patriarchy.

The discussion so far serves as evidence that women's sexuality has always remained under patriarchal surveillance and scrutiny, and that men have constantly exhibited their anxiety in such matters. As a consequence of their anxiety regarding women's sexuality, men have always questioned the sexual integrity of women, especially, when they have dared to traverse unconventional territory. Scriptures and other classical texts are also full of instances that question women's character and make various claims in its regard. These remarks play a crucial role in shaping mass perceptions regarding women. Tarabai challenges these vilifying remarks and questions the moral uprightness of men. She refuses to accept women as the incarnation of evil and treachery. Rebutting every charge made against women and their character, Tarabai puts forth a strong claim that men who quote scriptures to set high moral standards for the society and women, in particular, should not be oblivious of instances when women from epics have transgressed principles of fidelity. There have been times when queens produced their heir to the throne with a sage of her choice in case the king died.[4]

Tarabai voices a strong disapproval to the common assumption that it is a natural propensity of women to exhibit moral weakness. On the contrary, Tarabai asserts that it is the patriarchy driven social milieu that forces women into moral degradation. It is the oblivion and indifferent attitude of men towards their wives that lures women out of their homes in search of affection. More susceptible to such lures are widows who are deprived of every joy in their life. Unfortunately, most of these women are abandoned by men and consequently driven to commit infanticide or to a life of prostitution. Hence, it is men and the androcentric social order that should largely be held responsible for the moral degradation of women and the society at large. Tarabai's analysis of the textual representations of women gives a shaper edge to her investigation as it is indicative of her understanding of the politics and power of representation. Tarabai was not only aware of the scriptural instances of the past, but was also responsive to contemporary Marathi literature of her times that asserted similar misogyny.[5] As a canon predominated by men, such literature (whether in the form of novels, plays or newspapers) was infused with patriarchal ideals that drove the collective unconscious of its readers towards an anti-women sentiment. In the garb of reform, newspapers and creative writings by men propagated social conservatism and the ideals of women that seemed out of the real world. They were oblivious of the stark realities of the Indian women as it did not cater to popular appeal and commercial success. Tarabai, who understood the common anxieties and troubles of women (irrespective of their social status) and the inferior status accorded to them, thus openly condemned such textual instances that were employed in detrimental ways against women.

It was a result of the continuous propagation of patriarchal traditions through various media that women were forced into practices of "mandatory pre-pubertal marriage and immediate post-pubertal consummation of marriage; early and repeated pregnancies; and the

marginalization…having outlived their utility" (Kosambi 5-6). The acceptance of such an accentuated inferior status of women in every sphere of public and private life was indisputably condemned by Tarabai. She argued that while widows like Vijayalakshmi were questioned, epical instances of moral lax remained unconsidered. While the heads of widows were shaved, no one questions the men who were ever eager to possess these women. No questions were raised against fathers who married their young daughters to old men for money. Insensitivity was rampant towards the fate of child brides who soon turn into child widows or become *satis*. While the society expects all dedication from women, a man "can be as ugly as you like, full of vices, pitiless and cruel, fond of beating and harassing, who'll even keep his family short of food and drink. But people still give their girls to such bringers of misery, handing them over like cows to a butcher" (trans. O'Hanlon 104-5). Tarabai blamed such hypocrisy and mismatch marriage alliances as a reason that prompted women to seek love and affection outside marriage. Men showed apathy towards their wives. There was no love and appreciation for them and they were treated as slaves. Worst still, women, like any other thing in the house could be easily replaced. Despite being the victim, the society suspected their fidelity and character and declared them deceitful.

Once more drawing examples from the epics, Tarabai states that while it has been men who have disguised themselves and worn deception, it is still women who are blamed for deceiving the world. Although Ravana abducted Sita, she still had to undergo the *agni pareeksha*. Despite her purity people went on blaming her till Rama abandoned her and asked her to live in the forest. In contemporary times too, men who "parade in saffron robes" bear "the ulcer of evil thoughts" inside them (trans. O'Hanlon 109) and yet it is considered women's fault "if men act like bees round a honeycomb, greedy with desire just at the sight of her" (trans. O'Hanlon 111). Rebuking the entire class of men, Tarabai vehemently endorses the cause of women who have been labelled as whores just because they are widows.[6] She expressed her discontent against men who act as a moral authority to label women and question their integrity, despite themselves being responsible for women's promiscuous behaviour. Quoting the epics, Tarabai brings forth the legend of Ahalya whose virtue was stained by Indra. Tarabai also mentions Chandravali, a great pativrata, whose vow was wrecked by Lord Krishna guised as Rahi. As a witness to glaring disparity in gender relations, Tarabai indicts the writers of the scriptures of bias in laying down separate rules for men and women. It is a consequence of the scriptural indictments that women are pushed "in a dark corner far from the real world, shut up in a purdah, frightened, sat on, dominated as if she was a female slave." Tarabai, therefore, expresses disagreement against patriarchal and scriptural dominance and asserts that if men were to be treated as Gods by married women, then it is essential for men to be worthy of such treatment. In her opinion, "…if wives are to worship them like devotees, shouldn't husbands have a tender love for them in return, and care about their joys and pains like a real god would?" (trans. O'Hanlon 81)

The intense concern that Tarabai exhibited with regards to child marriage practices and the plight of child widows of her times was not new to her alone. From the beginning of the nineteenth century voices had begun to be raised against such social evils. Meera

Kosambi mentions the case of Parshurambhau Patwardhan who with the help of the Peshwa obtained "the written consent of the shastris of Banaras, who were influenced by his high status and the merits of the case, and who in turn influenced the Shankaracharya to give the necessary religious sanction. But ultimately the shastris of Pune frustrated the scheme by threatening Patwardhan's wife with widowhood as divine retribution if she consented; the mother, unwilling to jeopardise her present marital fortune (saubhagya) on the uncertain chance of her daughter's marital future, yielded" (Kosambi 95). Another notable effort in favour of child-widow remarriage was made in 1817 (just before the end of the Peshwa reign) by a Brahmin from Nashik who presented shastric evidence in support of his position. He was however, virulently opposed by fellow Brahmins and the matter came to an end (Kosambi 95). A prominent name to reckon with regards to child brides, widows and *sati* is that of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the founder of the Brahmo Samaj and a pioneer of social reform in Bengal. His ideology was a synthesis of the ideals of enlightenment and the philosophy of the Upanishads. His aim was to purge Hinduism of its corrupt practices, especially, from the practice of *Sati* and of discrimination against widows. Another well-known name in the field of women's reform and widows' upliftment is that of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar. A well-read Bengali Brahman, Vidyasagar worked towards introducing the practice of widow remarriages among the high caste Hindu society.

By the 1850s India was experiencing a wave of social reform for women. An entire class of high class/caste intellectuals had plunged themselves into purging the society of its orthodox misogynist practices. Child marriage, sati, illiteracy, purdah, infanticide, dowry, ill-treatment of widows and women's confinement to domesticity were only a few explicitly known practices that confirmed the working of patriarchy driven gender hierarchies within the society. The reformers made every effort to sensitize the society towards these unjust practices and highlight the victimization that women suffered at the hands of socio-religious patriarchal customs. Their close scrutiny of the prevalent Brahmanic and scriptural paradigm came openly into the public domain. Periodicals served as forums for such debates. Like many periodicals of its times, *Darpan*, a Marathi periodical, published two anonymous essays in 1837 and 1841 respectively, regarding the plight of child widows and their parents. The first essay stated that "remarriage should be allowed for pre-pubertal virgin widows; that girls should be married only after puberty; and that girls should be betrothed in childhood but married after puberty"(qtd. in Kosambi 95). This was seen as a measure to "prevent early widowhood; and was 'liberal' enough to dismiss the popular prejudice that the option of remarriage would encourage a woman to kill an unwanted husband to marry someone she preferred" (qtd. in Kosambi 96). The second essay also elucidated the plight of the child widow and her parents and raised "the realistic issue of the temptations of the flesh which led to adultery, unwanted pregnancies, abortions and infanticide; and of the dangerous influence of such immoral widows on other women" (qtd. in Kosambi 96). It is interesting to note that the essays supported the abolition of child marriage and supported the remarriage of not only child widows but also of adult widows. They also advocated women's education and proposed the training of adult Brahmin widows as teachers, with the help of the British government (qtd. in Kosambi 96). According to Kosambi, such "humanitarian arguments were backed by shastric sources to support widow remarriage, for example by Ranade (M.G.

Ranade 1889) and by liberal Marathi periodicals, such as the *Vividha Jnana Vistara* (February 1876:33), which listed seventeen calamities which entitled a woman to remarry, as for example, child-widowhood, marriage to a diseased man or a criminal" (Kosambi 98).

Apart from periodicals, reformers like Lokahitavadi, Phule, Sakhram Arjun and Ranade also raised their voice in favor of women's reform. In the mid-nineteenth century, Gopal hari Deshmukh 'Lokahitavadi' protested against the hypocritical stance of the society regarding morality which penalized only women. He stressed the need for widow remarriage and advocated that the age of marriage be raised so that the matrimonial alliances could be decided on the basis of free choice of both partners. He was also of the opinion that education for women was necessary in order to empower them and give them the courage to fight against unjust customs. Similarly, Ranade considered the "desperate misery" of infant widows to be "a scandal and a wrong which is a disgrace to any well regulated society" (Gidumal 155). In a similar vein, Dr. Sakharam Arjun advocated widow remarriage "as an efficient safety valve against unchastity and the horrible crime of child murder" (Gidumal 156). Phule too protested that widows were to be treated with respect as opposed to the general tendency of considering them "lower than a culprit or a mean beast" (Gidumal 150).

Unfortunately, despite the reformatory efforts of such men, no consensus had been reached among the Indian elite on these sensitive issues that directly affected the private and domestic sphere. The intellectuals were divided among themselves regarding the course that ought to be taken in this regard and women like Tarabai were not oblivious of such inconsistencies. They therefore accused the social reformers of their times for providing mere lip service to the cause of women's reform. Tarabai states in her essay: [Y]our mouths are full of talk about reform, but who actually does anything? You hold these great meetings, you turn up at them in your fancy shawls and embroidered turbans, you go through a whole ton of supari nut, carloads of betel leaves, you hand out all sorts of garlands, you use up a tank full of rosewater, then you come home. And that's it. That's all you do. These phoney reform societies of yours have been around for thirty, thirty-five years. What's the use of them? You're all there patting yourselves on the back, but if we look closely, they're about as much use as a spare tit on a goat (trans. O'Hanlon 85). Criticizing the inaction of the reformers, she further states that the old times when heroes of the sword existed in the Maratha kingdom had been lost. Reformers were only good at "pushing pens" and stuffing themselves with food. She questions them saying that if they were "so, clever, pious, charitable, compassionate," the "real *battislakshani* graced with all the virtues" then why haven't they got any love for their fellow creatures? (trans. O'Hanlon 89) She suggested that while there were efforts being made to improve the condition of women on the one hand, there were people such as the editor of the *Pune Vaibhav* who would just not allow women to taste freedom and equal rights. Despite being in the guise of reformers, men like him were the worst enemies of women.

Interestingly, Vijayakakshmi's case and Tarabai's treatise was crucial in exposing the common grounds shared by conservatives and reformers of the nineteenth century with regards to female sexuality and its expression. Both factions were of the view that women or particularly widows committing acts of moral waywardness ought to be punished and shamed

to deter others from transgressing the socially accepted path. The socio-political topography of nineteenth century India, in general, was influenced by the presence of a long standing Brahmin hegemony that controlled the society. In parts of the country once dominated by the Marathas,[7] the Brahmin hold was particularly significant. During the Maratha rule, the Brahmin Peshwas were ministers to the Marathi Chhatrapatis who subsequently asserted power and influence over the society. The political and economic dominance of the Peshwas was further reinstated by their supremacy in being experts of ancient Indian languages and literature. The dominance of the Brahmins created a religion-dominated society where every aspect of an individual's life drew reference from scriptures. From matters of social organization, political and legal setup, as well as matters related to home and domesticity, everything was decided by widely accepted scriptural prescriptions. These prescriptions were more often than not, androcentric. As a result, women suffered marginalization in every sphere — political, economic, social, domestic and legal.

According to Uma Chakravarti, "the Peshwai sought to recreate, at least ideologically, the Brahmanical Hindu kingdom which tried to strictly uphold the Brahmanical social order" (13). The Brahmins were the authority of socio-cultural control and Brahmin women, in particular, the site for enactment of their rules. Women were subjected to strict and coercive customs, and worse, were denied literacy despite belonging to a class that was the traditional literati of the Indian society. In addition to restrictions regarding women's participation in the public sphere, the expression of women's sexuality was particularly constrained. The traditions of child marriage and austere life for widows was strictly followed by the Peshwas. According to Meera Kosambi, the "Peshwa widows themselves displayed a variety of practices — the childless Ramabai immolated herself on the funeral pyre of her husband Madhavrao I in 1772; Yashodabai, expecting her first child, was prevented from similarly immolating herself when her husband Narayanrao (Madhavrao's younger brother) was assassinated in 1773…" (95). Such instances and many more like them served as presidents for most girls of nineteenth century India and created a milieu of moral panopticism and sexual subjugation. Sexuality and its expression within the society was determined and understood through a religious prism. Consequently, women found themselves in a less advantageous position and many like Vijayalakshmi, became easy victims of parochial mindset. It was a result of a Brahmanised social milieu that when Vijayalakshmi's case came to the fore, newspapers like the *Pune Vaibhav* made sweeping statements regarding the moral lax of women as a whole. The *Bombay Samachar* in harsher terms stated that in view of horrible crimes such as infanticide, widows should be sentenced to a period of imprisonment that would make them suffer more as compared to execution that ended their troubles in a few minutes. T. Madhav Rao, a well-known Maratha reformer, also held a similar view. In an article to the *Times of India* he stated that a widow should "suffer the pain of shame which she had dreaded so much…Being kept alive, she is frequently the subject of conversation, and consequently her punishment is kept more before the female public mind" (qtd. in O'Hanlon 37).

In addition to the socio-religious influences on the reformers, protecting native traditions, customs and culture was also an essential agenda of the nationalist politics in colonial times. The nationalists of nineteenth century India suffered from the anxieties of

proving civilizational superiority. Their pursuit was not solely the freedom of the nation but also the establishment of a strong, unconquerable image of the indigenous civilization and culture that was superior to that of the colonizer's cultural heritage. It was this anxiety that led to many intellectuals, including the editor of the *Pune Vaibhav*, to retaliate and express reservations on matters regarding expression of female sexuality. On the question of abolishing child marriage and raising the age of consent, the nationalist-revivalists used "an explicitly nationalist rhetoric against any form of colonial intervention within the Hindu domestic sphere" and were committed to "an unreformed Hindu way of life" (Sarkar 191-92). Along these lines, "the revivalist-nationalists chose to tie their nationalism to issues of conjugality, which they defined as a system of non-consensual, indissoluble, infant marriage" (Sarkar 192).

Confronting her contemporary male reformers, Tarabai questioned that if women were put through suffering, why shouldn't men do the same? What harm had women done to the writers of the *shastras* that they wrote rules only for women to abide? These questions reiterated Tarabai's concern regarding *dharma* and women being its exclusive bearers. She expressed an unapologetic opposition against the creators of scriptures, challenging them that if they had the power to alter women's lives, "why is it so impossible for you to pull poor widows out of this pit of shame?" Why can't they "break some caste rules, put *kumkum* back on their foreheads and let them enjoy the happiness of marriage again?" (trans. O'Hanlon 82). In addition, Tarabai considered that except *Savitri* no other legendary *pativrata* woman had fought with *Yama* to bring back her husband's life. All of them were allowed to marry a second time (after they had lost their husband) and bear children. She also asserted that while there were legends of women saving the lives of their husbands, there was no legend that spoke of a man who fought with *Yama* to bring back his wife's life. The question thus raised by her was that: When life and death were not in the power of the mortals then why were women forced to live a life of shame when her husband died? Why did she have to hide her face as if she has committed a huge crime? A widow was forced to live a life of self-effacement, shave her hair, spend the rest of her life in seclusion and live a life devoid of all colours, sights, sounds and smells of pleasure. Furthermore, a widow was considered unlucky, ill-fated and seeing her face was treated as a bad omen. According to Kosambi, the "custom of child marriage, coupled with high mortality, was directly responsible for the wide prevalence of widowhood: widowers had the option of remarrying, which widows did not" (97). Contrary to women, men were not supposed to abandon anything after the death of their wives. They need not shave their moustache and live in austerity for the rest of their lives. For them, one wife was replaced by another.

At this juncture, it would also not be inappropriate to reiterate that discourses of women's sexuality, morality, conjugal rights and the debate regarding the age of consent, all exhibited a lopsided equation of gender hierarchy. While men asserted an upper hand in all spheres, women remained victimized for the most part. Though efforts to improve the condition of women were being made by some dedicated social reformers, the approach remained patriarchal and androcentric in most cases. Whenever confronted with the women's question, Indian nationalist reformers attributed women with ideals of purity and motherhood. Vivekananda, for instance, was of the belief that India was the centre of ideal

Aryan womanhood. He claimed that according to the Vedas, a woman was a *sahadharmini* or co-religionist in every ritual performed in the society. Vivekananda also eulogized motherhood and associated true motherhood with chastity. He believed that motherhood completed a woman's existence. It is also interesting to note that Vivekananda categorically dismissed any ill treatment of women and asserted that he had travelled all over India but failed to see "a single case of ill treatment." In other words, Vivekananda was confident that women have always been respected in the society and that the Hindus as "a race that produced Sita, even if it only dreamt of her, has a reverence for woman that is unmatched on earth…." (qtd. in Chakravarti 78).

The hypocritical stance of the nationalists was evident in the manner in which they expressed their disagreement in matters concerning granting liberty to women within the domestic sphere (let alone their participation in the public sphere). While they wanted to give a face lift to their self-image in comparison to the imperial normative of masculinity, their efforts were not directed towards diluting the prevalent gender hierarchy. It may also be observed that as part of the patriarchal agenda, women's sexuality and purity never remained localized to domesticity rather was treated as extended discourses concerning the moral health of the entire society. As citizens of a newly forming nation, in particular, the nationalists displayed a still higher degree of anxiety when it came to questions of women's sexuality and morality in their society. For women were projected as representatives of a nation's culture and tradition. They were ascribed values of maternity, purity and the willingness to suffer. In addition, women of the epics were popularized as national icons and real women were coaxed to follow the epical model of unreal women. This also followed the erasure of the social presence of women as individuals. They were ideal daughters, sisters, wives and mothers but never independent individuals.

Ironically, while mothers provided the nation its soldiers, they were not equal in power or value to men. The terrain of the nationalist discourse was primarily masculinized and women's bodies were associated with the feminine and vulnerable aspects of nation. Even when women tried to enter the landscape of nationalist discourses, they had to either take on masculine traits or enter as mothers of sons. In this regard, Nirmal Puwar argues that "some bodies are seemed as having the right to belong, while others are marked as trespassers, who are, in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined (politically, historically and conceptually circumscribed) as being out of place. Not being the somatic norm they are space invaders" (qtd. in Banerjee 9). In a similar vein, George Mosse expresses that, "If woman was idealized [as a symbol of the nation], she was at the same time put very firmly into her place. Those who did not live up to the ideal were perceived as a menace to society and the nation, threatening the established order they were intended to uphold" (qtd. in Banerjee 9). Woman who defy dependence on patriarchal relationships and dare to create an identity for themselves were not tolerated. Their character was suspected, their integrity and honour questioned. Above all, they were seen as a threat to the moral code of the society. Vijayalakshmi's choice to end her child's life certainly went against the male-favouring agenda of the society — a society that assigns women the irrevocable role of the nation's mother. It was an uncomfortable truth for men to come to terms with that a woman

had decided to take control of her body and sexuality as well as defy the normative conduct of a woman. It also went against the patriarchal interests of the society where women are seen as the bearers of sons who would serve the motherland.

Striking heavily on the hypocrisy of the nationalist's patriarchal claim of preserving tradition, Tarabai categorically points out that the advocates of tradition have no moral authority to blame women of endangering the nation's traditions when they have themselves endorsed British traditions in all aspects of their lives. From clothing, food, education, mannerisms, architecture and social behaviour, the Indian elite men were blindly aping the British in almost everything. But when it came to questions of giving women new alternatives outside the domestic sphere, they stepped back and took a firm stand on keeping the civilization's traditions unaltered. It may not be inappropriate to infer here that the reformatory rhetoric envisaged a covert patriarchal agenda in which superficial changes hide the subtle undercurrents of male control. Gender hierarchies remained unaltered despite the claims of the nationalist reformers. The patriarchal panopticism over women's sexual expression and liberty did not end. Rather, it only intensified for Indian women whose conduct was now not only a subject of concern by Indian men but also for the British. Giving a new lease of hope to Indian women carried with it the agenda of creating a new masculine identity for the Indian male. According to O'Hanlon, while the emphasized discourse on gender relations served as a significant element in the construction of colonial hegemony, it also provided "key groups of Indian and British men alike with a common language in which they were able to discuss and agree on important aspects of the Indian social order" (O'Hanlon 3). Furthermore, the distinction of "a particular 'public' and masculine domain, as opposed to the domestic as a sacrosanct private realm of family and religion" was a view that appealed both, Victorian colonial officials, as well as, the important classes of Indian men who were "anxious to find means of preserving these areas of their own power against colonial intervention" (O'Hanlon 3).

In the light of a mutual agreement regarding the working of the society between the colonizers and the Indian elite, it was not unexpected to witness that male reformers, politicians, journalists and writers who fought for the rights of women, were the ones who in cases such as that of Vijaylakshmi, demanded that women should continue to conform to the normative socio-cultural rules. For intellectual women like Tarabai, it was ironic to witness that while everything was changing for men in terms of new rights and freedoms, women such as Vijaylakshmi were victimized and loaded with the blame for all of society's evils. It is evident that the reform movement had not served the purpose of diluting gender hierarchies within the society but had rather served to mark the division of the inner and outer sphere more distinctly. In an attempt to remove the yoke of orthodox customs from the shoulders of women, the reformers ended up adding new responsibilities for women to abide by. Old, iconic stereotypes were replaced by new bourgeois ideals. Women still remained excluded from the public sphere and subordinate to patriarchal dictates on the domestic front. The most significant outcome of the reformatory efforts of the Indian nationalists, however, was the creation of a new identity for the Indian male. By incorporating Victorian ideals into the definition of the new ideal Indian woman, the reformers were able to win allegiance of the

British. The British in return followed a policy of minimum interference in the socio-religious matters of the colonized.

To conclude, it may be inferred that the discourse on gender relations emerged as a new powerful means for the consolidation of the Indian patriarchy and in serving as an expression of civilizational superiority. The contribution of women like Tarabai lay not only in their strong realization and unapologetic commentary on the impossible position in which women in nineteenth century society were placed, but also in their critique of the hypocritical stance of Indian male reformers. While women continued to conform to the socio-cultural normative of unattainable ideals in their private sphere, their individual failure encompassed the entire public sphere. Women were caught in a contradiction where they had "no means of making themselves heard amongst the voices that constantly discussed them and constantly found them deficient" (O'Hanlon 9).

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Notes:

[1]The myth of *Arundhati* narrates the incidence of *Brahma* (the Creator) displaying erotic desires for his daughter *Sandhya* (Twilight) and she for him, under the influence of *Kama* (Eros). Such feelings being sinful, *Brahma* (after being disillusioned) curses *Kama* to be burnt by *Lord Shiva*. *Sandhya*, on the other hand, resolves to purify herself. She prays to *Lords Shiva* who in turn, grants her a wish that new-born creatures would be free from desire and would become subject to it only on reaching their youth. She then offers herself to fire and is reborn as a chaste, infant girl *Arundhati*, who later marries the sage *Vashishtha*.

[2]Before her marriage to *Pandu*, *Kunti* was blessed with a son by the sun-god, *Surya*. In order to save herself from disgrace, *Kunti* had to bear the pain of abandoning her son (*Karan*) as he was born outside the bonds of legal marriage.

[3]In one of the episodes of Ramayana, for instance, *Anusuya* instructs *Sita* on the duties of a wife. She advices her that even if one's husband is without fortune he should be unhesitatingly obeyed by his wife. A woman should honour her husband even more if he is renowned for his virtues, is religious, compassionate, affectionate and tender to his wife. She says that no austerity, other than obedience to one's husband is decreed for a woman. Giving the example of *Savitri* and *Rohini*, *Anusuya* says that while *Savitri* is highly honored in heaven because she served her husband faithfully, goddess *Rohini* is never seen without the moon, her lord. She blesses *Sita* that she too shall enjoy the bliss of heaven for she too obeyed and served her husband well.

[4] Legend in the Mahabharata are an evidence in this regard. Pandu and Dhritrashtra were begotten by the queens of Hastinapur as a result of their alliance with a sage after the death of their husband. Similarly, Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, begot her sons from various Gods.

[5] Tarabai quotes two such textual instances where the nature of women has been portrayed in a bad light. The nineteenth century writer Shridhar in his *Ramvijaya* states that: Woman is only the axe, which cuts down trees of virtue/Hindrance to creatures through thousands of births/Know her to be the temptress, embodiment of pains in this world (trans. O'Hanlon 99) The second instance quoted be Tarabai is from Bharatrhari's '*Three centuries of Verse*'. With regards to women, the poet states that: A whirlpool of changing whims, a house of vice, a city of shamelessness/A mine of faults, a region of deceit, a field of distrust/Obstacle at heaven's door, mouth of hell's city, well of evil magic/ Who made this woman-device, sweet poison and trap of all creatures? (trans. O'Hanlon 100)

[6] According to O'Hanlon, the sexual availability of widows was both a social commonplace and a source of humour. In Marathi, the terms for widow and prostitute were in many contexts interchangeable (13, O'Hanlon).

[7] The Maratha Empire existed from 1674 to 1818 and ruled over a large area of the Indian sub-continent. At its peak, the Maratha Empire included nearly the entire geographical extent of India, except for a part of southern India that was ruled by the Nizams, a part of present day Uttar Pradesh which constituted the kingdom of Oudh and a present day West Bengal that was ruled by the British.