

The Nation and the Woman: Reading Maitreyi Devi's *It Does Not Die* in Post Globalized India

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Abstract

The discursive territory of the idea of a nationalism that was taking shape in the early decades of the previous century employed the notion of womanhood as a critical component. The construct of the Indian woman, as noted social scientist Partha Chatterjee observes became instrumental in shaping the idea of the nation at a time when the idiom of nationalism was negotiating its invariable dialogue/exchange with Western modernity. Even as the new Indian woman partakes of the accomplishments of Western modernity, she remains the principal custodian of the pristine, unadulterated space of the home and bearer of the normative familial conjugal values. The icon of the modern accomplished women enshrined within sanctified normative space of the home becomes emblematic of the idea nation and its troubled dialogue with modernity. Maitreyi Devi's novel *Na Hanyate* (translated in English as *It Does Not Die*) which is the primary focus of this paper offers a valuable opportunity to study the ramification of nationalistic ideology and Indian womanhood at the time it was taking shape. This paper intends to explore how her reminiscence of an interracial romance is also an attempt to articulate an autonomous voice and reclaim a shared private space that runs against the normative coda of Indian woman. The multiple adaptations of this tale – both credited and uncredited – are studied alongside to explore perception and evolution of modern womanhood in contemporary times.

Keywords: Nation, Nationalism, Narration, Race, Comparison

Introduction

The latest phase in India's sociocultural and political space is germane with projects that increasingly seek to compare and to define identity, cultures and ultimately nation in terms of mutually exclusive ideas. It espouses as Ania Loomba observes, "a hierarchical relation between the entities being compared or simply exclude large chunks of reality from its domain". Two articles in particular - Ania Loomba's "Race and the Possibilities of Comparative Critique" (Loomba, 2009) and Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's "Rethinking Comparativism" (Spivak, 2009) - seek to meditate the apparently latent dangers inherent in the method of comparison: one that tends to fine tune inflexible markers of ranking and categorizations operating on notions of exclusions and omissions. Spivak underlines the importance of understanding and consequently restoring an "equivalence" among disparate objects of comparison. Noted Bengali litterateur Maitreyi Devi's Bengali novel "Na Hanyate" which was written in 1975 as a response to or rather as a rebuttal of renowned philosopher and Historian of religion Mircea Elida's Romanian novel "Maitreyi" (first published in 1933) is an interesting case in point. The readings of these novels and their film adaptation - both credited and uncredited - resonate with Spivak's cautionary observations and often demonstrate the alarming trend that Loomba identifies.

Set in 1930's a doomed interracial romance between a young European man and Indian woman of an erudite academic family is at the heart of Mircea Eliad's "Maitreyi", (Eliad 1994; also translated as *La Nuit Bengal* in French, and in English as *Bengal Nights*) and *Na Hanyate* by Maitreyi Devi (Devi, 1974; translated as *It Does Not Die* in English) and their subsequent film adaptation in *The Bengali Night* (Klotz, 1988) - a British French collaboration based on the French translation. A more contemporized albeit uncredited Hindi adaptation of the source material in *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (Bhansali, 1999) followed in the closing decades of twentieth century. While the Indian film which released decades later in a more contemporized time helped launch Indian film maker Sanjay Leela Bhansali's brand as a maker of lavish opulent productions it also set the premise for a certain idiom of forbidden love. Furthermore, it also reconstructs an ideal of a normative conjugality within the larger space of an ideal India, a discourse that was already fermenting right at the time of the occurrence of the events depicted in Devi's novel at the wake of the nationalist movement. This paper intends to study and Devi's novel and the readings these two companion novels have generated across decades themselves to examine how both the normative ideas of the nation and its women consistently subsumed the women's voice and the autonomous private space of the couple. The paper intends to show how even the mature Devi's own struggle while recounting her passionate longing for the European scholar in retrospect is in itself a testimony of the near impossibility of attaining an autonomous voice and agency of a woman in defining herself and carving her conjugal space. Her novel, this paper argues reveals her inner struggle to articulate her private desires and longing while constantly being mindful of the norm of a "respectable" Indian woman demonstrates the insurmountable barriers of the normative space of the nation and conjugality.

Beginning from the publication of Eliad's novel *Maitreyi* in Romanian in 1933 to the making and release of the film *Hum Dil de Chuke Sanam* they traverse a better part of a century that was historically and discursively shaped by competing dialogue and comparative narratives on the idea of nation. In the collective psyche the nation always hinged on the matrix of what constitutes an ideal femininity and what are the markers of an ideal conjugality. Framed against this the idea of a romance – especially an interracial romance – became both the subject and the object of comparatist tropes for analyzing and assessing normative conjugality and its ability to build a model home, and by extension a model nation. Maitreyi Devi's novel which is the chosen as the primary point of reference is premised upon the same biographical and experiential reality of the forbidden and ultimately doomed affair between a young Indian woman and a visiting European scholar in an upper middle class erudite household in 1930's Calcutta offers a compelling narrative on the space of nation, the familial and the conjugal. The film adaptations, particularly that of Bhansali's offer an additional subject of comparison with respect to its uncredited source: the evolution of the nationalistic as well as the domestic space in the post globalized India. Essentially then this intertextual site offers an opportunity to study the evolution of multiple tropes from the pre independent to the post globalized India: the nation and the home, the space, voice and agency of the woman and the conjugal space.

To begin with Devi's novel in particular and the multiple renditions and reading of this interracial and ultimately doomed affair is inscribed with a dialogue as well as a confrontation between a Eurocentric brand of modernity on the one hand and anti-colonial and anti-European nationalism on the other. In the process it specifically engages with what Partha Chatterjee (Chatterjee, 1993) sums up as the intersection of nationalism, modernity and how it tackled the "women's question" and resolved it. Employing a principle of distinction between the home (*ghar*) and the world (*bahir*) and a concomitant principle of "selection" to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project it tried to construct a respectable

Indian woman at once possessing some selective accomplishments/matrix of Western modernity but paradoxically immune to the “West”. What is interesting, and what forms the basis of this paper is that while, Devi’s novel despite being a tale of unfulfilled love engages with a variety of conflicting ideas to open a level playing field as means of introspection of the self, the identity and India (as a nation and a concept) the handful of critical responses to these texts and their visual translation tread an opposite path. The latter (which includes comparative readings of this books and the European, and Hindi film) exploit this experiential reality singularly in terms of a method of comparison that judge and chooses to glean the truth from the supposed array of counter truth; categorizes in order to reach its conclusive pragmatic resolution which repackages the image of the new Indian woman or “bhadramahila” as the bearer of the pristine timeless purity and essence of India. New, because she is quite the opposite of and superior to the common lot in terms of learning, accomplishments and normative moral virtues in order to become a projection of a nation. (Chatterjee 1993, pp 127).

Section 2: He Said She Said

I will first refer to the responses that these two novels received after they were published in a single volume by the University of Chicago press in 1995. Ginu Kamani in her article (Kamani, 1996) makes a neat itemization of these reviews and concludes succinctly that most responses compare in order to rank these texts as a better version of same biographical reality, saying of Devi’s book for example “one sided”, self-absorbed, anti-intellectual arrogance” (Berkson, 1994); “Her angry response is naïve, and rather Indian” (Buruma, 1994). Others denounce Eliad’s novel as “typical of the broader history of colonialism is Eliad’s denial of any culpability on his part... an Orientalist fantasy and a male fantasy” (Fleming, 1994); “a desire to display his superiority, and to command possession of [Maitreyi’s] entire culture - her language, her family, her literature” (Tharoor, 1994). The use of terms like “naïve and very Indian” or “culpability” or “fantasy” reveal a trend in the critical eye in this intertextual reading in order to compare and corroborate the partner texts in the form of a competing narrative in favor of ascertaining the veracity of the events depicted, (that hardly pertains to a critical reading of the texts, even though the authors themselves engage with the events as defining moments of their life) to complete a jigsaw puzzle of sorts of a perpetration of a crime of the worst nature. One of the governing principles here is to restore the truth about the supposed violation of Maitreyi’s honor by a European. This is coupled with an obsession to interpret this incident in a simplistic and predictable light of colonial subjugation and arrogance. Eliade’s emotional outpour is seen as a sample of colonial conquest based on a colonial phantasy and scholars are never tire of citing Eliade’s reference to Maitreyi’s color of skin or her raw physicality; his inability to understand the inner/sanctified space of the Indian home, and in the process strips the individuality of the woman that emerges from both these texts, and reinstates her as the dishonored icon of the nation, falling in line with the scheme that already began as an agenda of the nationalist ideology in the early decades of the 19th century.

Ironically even as these responses are obsessed to restore the truth, they fail to notice that Maitreyi’s Devi’s text reduces this entire question of colour as nothing more than a visible attribute or her distaste towards her British ruler. Carpenter (2006) sees Eliade’s text as a metaphorical act of violence and revenge given the high value placed on chastity in Indian society. It is equally important to note that Eliade’s novel also rejects and ridicules essentialist notion of India as a land spiritual magic and mysticism. Allain, the protagonist of this novel, rejects reigning western assumption about India as a land of spiritual magic that

reduces the vastness and the complexity of the idea of India. In his autobiographical accounts of the same incidents, his tryst with India is perceived as a journey of introspection and self-discovery.

Those who are empathetic towards Maitreyi Devi and those who write her off for revisiting a rather turbulent phase in her life eventually focus on the plights of respectable educated Indian woman whose honor was ruined in act of metaphorical violence by an arrogant outsider who had in the process also violated the sanctity of an Indian home and betrayed the mentor. Both base their responses on an aimless search for “facts” with regard to a supposed violation of women’s honor and its and less on the complexities of the text.

Section 3 The Home and the World

Set in 1930’s Calcutta the household of Amrita/Maitreyi exemplifies all the attributes of the new patriarchy that Partha Chatterjee elaborates in the chapters “The Nation and It’s Women” and “Women and the Nation” (Chatterjee, 1993): one that would apparently empower women, allow her intellectual accomplishments but also harness her autonomy by imposing at the same time a whole new set of controls. Maitreyi is not only equipped in the usual accomplishment of the new woman, but her intellectual superiority is also far higher under the mentoring of his professor father and the affection that she receives from her mentor and confidante Rabindranath Tagore. The text merges two different voices - one young, and the other mature, and the rather problematic process in which these voices at different periods of their life try to at once resist and yet succumb to the norm of honor and chastity. The voice from the inner space of home also illumines the surge of many diverse ideas that had held an India at that time of great flux. But that voice does not communicate a sense of univocal affiliation but rather articulates a powerful note of dissent and an internalized critique of the image of the Indian woman even as they are inescapably tied to these notions.

What makes the text particularly remarkable is its seamless intermingling of the private, inner courtyard of the home and the mind with the wider context outside which she partakes directly. Thus, her poignant tale of love and loss coexists with an emerging nation where ironically many things were changing rapidly while an essentialist unchangeable India simultaneously was being manufactured seen through a woman’s eye. Amrita, the protagonist in Devi’s novel experiences the coming of age of Indian dance with Uday Shankar, coexisting with the anticolonial struggle, the coexistence of the poignance of Shakesperean romance with *Vaisnav sahitya* symptomatic of the birth of a new aesthetics born out of a symbiotic exchange of the East and the West. In short what I want to highlight is the pervasive presence of a womanist consciousness – a part of which remained rooted to the domesticity and the norms attached with it, and the other, trying to break free all that she apparently holds dear and yet another that wants to participate actively.

In the limited scope of this paper, I will highlight just a few aspects of the complexity that the text addresses in order to enumerate this element of dissent through the trope of a woman’s private space and autonomous voice. Young Amrita constantly debates with the idea of purity and honor that she has been taught ever since she was a child and the pleasure that she derives out of the so-called dishonorable intimate space she can only share with Mircea. The mature Amrita admits over and over again that even as she is plagued by a notion of violation of her honor that Eliades novel might have brought upon her, the voice from the past communicates to her such a visceral sense of joy that makes the question of honor sometimes all too redundant. The entire text and the context demonstrate this paradox: a rational and prudent attempt to reaffirm a sense of honor and to denounce the untruth of honor while also reliving again that private

intimate space that she and Mircea had shared. She admits that this space that they had created together decades ago has intruded into her present breaking the walls of her normative conjugal-domestic space. The search for truth often occludes the importance of social construct of space in Maitreyi Devi's novel. The process of the appropriation of certain elements of modernity like the décor of a house, or inviting a European outsider is almost always auxiliary to the sanctified Indian patrilineal communal space of home. The texts consistently elaborate the subtle politics of an Indian patrilineal domestic space based on the unstated autocracy of the master and the silence of the mistress of the house and others. What is even more pertinent is that the European student had become some sort of a collectible for the professor to flaunt and climb the ladders of the erudite angelized Calcutta. In fact, those who read Mircea as a violator of the sanctity of the teacher student relationship overlook Amrita's assertion that her entire family, including herself her mother and Mircea are his father's prized possession. This is important in so far as it shows how Mircea's fairness real and metaphorical sub serves a gross utilitarian goal for Maitreyi's father to construct a domestic space that incorporates certain coveted elements of Western modernity to reinvent itself and its women but preserving a timeless essence of India by denying her agency.

The authors description of her life after marriage is not about her lost love, but an irremediable solitude. It is born out of the inability to create a private conjugally shared space exemplified in her text by her inability to share a piece of poem, or her appreciation for an author. Amrita tries and, in most part, succeeds fulfilling the role of the new Indian wife within the codified norms of conjugality, but confesses to the void, the silence and the distance that is at the heart of her marriage. Her social work and her sustained community service to the tribal populace is her compensatory attempt to fill the void and create a more rewarding public space outside of the home. The more satisfying public space (and public voice) is juxtaposed against the normative home bereft of the private space. Rarely does her suppressed individuality that was burgeoning during her brief romantic interlude with Mircea surface in her conversations with her husband follow the norm of the wife and mother. To a discerning reader Maitreyi Devi's novel reveals her subliminal search to reclaim that agency if not that space within the familial space of the home and the wider normative space of the nation.

Section 4: The Forbidden on Screen

The two films, however, completely steer clear of it- it neither dwell on a woman's struggle to carve her own niche at a time when her persona, her role and her position in larger scheme of things were components of a greater nationalistic idiom. The British French collaborative effort, "Bengal Nights" is an unimaginative bland account of the amorous liaison between a European boy and the Indian girl, without the context that is so vividly described in Devi's novel. I will not go into the details, or the lack of detailing in this film, except the part where upon finding out about the involvement with the European outsider the mother performs an exorcism of sorts on the girl. The cinematography employs the predictable notion of the India which resorts to black magic as means of resolution. The movie closes abruptly after Alain is banished from the household.

The Indian counterpart which is loosely based on Maitreyi Devi's novel turned out to be a block buster and falls in the category of what M.K. Raghavendra calls the feudal family romance that glamorizes the dominant and images of family, nation and the women's question (Raghavendra, 2014). This genre of film which gained prominence in the last decades of the 20th century propagates the idea of the controlling hand of the family, and a submissive womanhood who remains an instrument rather than being an agent of culture, whose choices and consciousness are not an expression of an autonomous will but rather what is

expected of her. Thus, the heroine chooses marriage over love in the closing minutes of the film, an act that implicitly legitimizes the decision of the family and upholds the community over the individual. But perhaps what is most important is that the film along with many others perpetuate and romanticize the image of the pan Indian “Bhadramahilla” within a more contemporized scenario in the post globalized India.

Section 5: Conclusion

In recent years the question of woman’s agency seems to have gained considerable traction in critical studies in India. Maitreyi Devi’s novel provides a significant point of reference as it studies the woman’s ownership of her space and her autonomous voice and situates these two important questions right at the center of the discursive territory of Indian Nationalism and the role of women within it. In doing so it provides critical insight into the matrix of the modern Indian woman that has unfortunately remained static over the years. If read from the perspective of a woman’s attempt to articulate her right to carve her conjugal space Maitreyi Devi’s text emerges as a valuable critique of the idea of a nation that works only by subsuming womanhood and conjugality.

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