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Negotiating Femininity: Representation and Power under Colonial Rule

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Abstract

This article examines how two distinct ideologies—Imperialist and Nationalist—have represented women as subjects within their respective narratives. It argues that these narratives reflect two contrasting understandings of modernity: while the Imperialist discourse defined modernity through a Eurocentric lens, the Nationalist perspective associated modernity, particularly in relation to women, with a sense of Indianness—that is, being "modern but in a different sense." Furthermore, this study explores how women themselves carved out spaces for participation in the public sphere, especially through their writings. The article concludes that colonial reforms concerning women were not genuinely aimed at their upliftment but rather served to legitimize British rule in India. Nevertheless, from the 1920s onward, women made consistent efforts to assert their presence in the public domain, a process that is clearly reflected in their literary and journalistic contributions.

Keywords: Contesting womanhood; Representation; Imperialist; Nationalist; Modernity; Print; Politization of Woman

Introduction

The term 'contesting womanhood' refers to the process of rebuilding the identity of women according to the demands of the time. In colonial India, particularly from the 1920s onwards, both imperialist and nationalist ideologies were repeatedly redefining the meaning and identity of womanhood. At the same time, Indian women were also trying to create space for themselves so that their voices could gain value not only in the social domain but also in the political sphere.

This paper examines the politics underlying women's representation and the ways in which women were used as subjects to advance competing political agendas. The narratives constructed around women were neither static nor uniform; rather, they evolved over time in response to shifting political and social needs. Within this entire process, the most significant aspect was the idea of representation — how these two ideological powers were using women as subjects, and how women themselves were representing the idea of womanhood in their writings. This study also explores how these narratives entered the public sphere, the frameworks through which they were articulated, and the transformations they underwent over time. Furthermore, it investigates how women themselves engaged with these narratives — whether they functioned merely as passive readers or emerged as active contributors. It also analyses the nature of women's contributions within the public sphere, assessing the extent to which their writings were critical, resistant, or revolutionary in character. By analysing all these aspects, this study highlights how the processes of representation and identity-making were working simultaneously for Indian women, which

directly and, in some cases, indirectly empowered them. This forms the main argument of the paper, which will be discussed in the following sections.

Existing Scholarship shows, that in colonial india, women as a matter of gender has studied through multiple approaches, with scholars drawing on a range of archival sources to uncover women's voices. These voices, however, were rarely as audible or prominent as those of patriarchal men, whose perspectives dominated historical narratives. This imbalance stemmed from the fact that most surviving records were generated and articulated by elite men with substantial social, economic, and political capital. Within this framework, historians such as Charu Gupta, Tanika Sarkar, and Mrinalini Sinha have made significant contributions by employing diverse sources, including official records, private and institutional papers, and journals, to trace women's presence and agency even Ishita Chakravarty in her work has drawn on periodicals and journals to recover the voices of Bengali women, demonstrating how, in the 1920s, certain Bengali journals such as Prabasi initiated campaigns promoting women's self-reliance.[1]

Contrasting Ideological Visions of the 'Modern' Woman

As far as the scholarship on women in colonial india is concern so it has mainly revolved around two major interpretative frameworks: imperialist discourse and nationalist response. The imperialist discourse gained renewed momentum after the publication of Katherine Mayo's Mother India (1927), which asserted that the condition of Indian women had only improved under British rule.[2] Her infamous framing—that white men and women were saving brown women from brown men— was co-opted by the colonial state as a moral justification for its continued domination. Indian society was thus portrayed as backwards and in need of civilising reforms, positioning Indian women as passive recipients of British benevolence.

In contrast, nationalist discourse rejected this colonial framing and asserted the indigenous roots of women's empowerment. Nationalist thinkers responded to colonial reforms rhetoric by asserting that Indian women were not oppressed but had always occupied a dignified position within society.[3] They reimagined Indian women as "different but modern," drawing upon religious and cultural traditions to present a version of modernity distinct from that of the colonial state. This discourse resisted the idea that Indian modernity must be shaped by Western norms and instead proposed a culturally rooted national identity, with women symbolising both continuity and reform.

These two major ideological frameworks approached the question of women in completely different ways. On one hand, the imperialists projected themselves as reformed, modern, and enlightened; on the other, the nationalists sought to portray Indian culture and traditions as moral, culturally rooted, and modern — though in a distinctly different sense, with these ideological differences, their definitions of a free and independent woman also differed from each other. Despite all these ideological differences, one thing that cannot be ignored is that both imperialist and nationalist discourses were deeply intertwined. as each sought to assert control over the representation of Indian women.[4] Along with this aspect, we also need to understand that, the debate surrounding women in colonial India represented a larger contest between the

[1] Ishita Chakravarty, The Earning Bhadramahila and the 'Endangered Race' *Economic and Political Weekly 57* no. 32, August 2022, pp. 66-72.
[2] Katherine Mayo, *Mother India* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927).
[3] Mrinalini Sinha, *Refashioning Mother India: Feminism and Nationalism in Late Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).
[4] Sangeeta Ray, *En-Gendering Indian Women and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 09.

so-called ideas of Modernity and Indian-ness.[5] According to the colonialists, women could attain freedom, individuality, and agency only through the adoption of modern values — a notion of modernity that was entirely constructed within a Western framework. Conversely, the Indian nationalists argued that women possessed agency and space within an indigenous cultural framework — one that could not be comprehended through Western paradigms. Through this analysis, it clearly reflects, that the discourse on women was, in fact, less about women themselves and more about the clash between two distinct cultural and ideological worlds, where political motives and propaganda functioned as the driving forces.

Another crucial question examined in this paper concerns the evolving and dynamic nature of discursive formations surrounding women, particularly when they became central to colonial and nationalist debates. As far as the ideology of the Raj is concern so it was not monolithic but underwent continuous ideological reconstruction in response to shifting historical and political contingencies. These transformations, in turn, reconfigured the discursive positioning of gender and women, whose representation was constantly being negotiated, redefined, and instrumentalized within changing regimes of power and knowledge. In the formative phase of the modern period when European travellers who visited India during the early modern period constructed the land through narrative, often employing the term discovery. By frequently invoking the language of discovery, the British established a privileged epistemological position: as "discoverers," they could claim to produce new knowledge, which was then circulated through rigid colonial binaries—civilization versus barbarism, modernity versus tradition, Christianity versus heathenism, among others.[6] however, after the Revolt of 1857, there was a notable shift in the colonial construction of knowledge. The language of rescue began to replace that of discovery, aligning more closely with gendered concerns.[7] From this point onwards, the colonial state claimed a moral responsibility to "rescue" brown women from Hindu and Muslim men. According to imperialist discourse, these men were not only inherently evil but also potential sexual predators.

Historically, this marked a critical shift: native men were portrayed as threats not only to English women but also to native women. The colonial state, through such narratives, constructed Indian men as immoral, barbaric, and obscene. Simultaneously, these narratives placed silent but significant pressure on english women, who were now held up as moral exemplars for indian women to emulate. With this ideological framing, the behaviour and public image of english women came under increasing regulation by the state, which had already declared that the English home was a space of joy, equality, and gender harmony. It reflects that not only native women but english women were also getting effected by colonial rule and this was happening in direct and indirect both the ways.

From Representation to Participation: Women and the Print Medium

It becomes evident that women were significantly impacted by colonial narratives and their systems of knowledge. Now what becomes historically essential to analyse is what were the women take over this politics of portrayal, but before this it becomes important to examine the nature and objectives of politics of representation. The term 'Representation' inherently carries political implications, as any public medium that portrays a particular group, caste, class, or gender in a specific manner inevitably constructs and attaches a certain identity to them. Charu Gupta says representation is as significant as 'reality' or 'facts',

[5] Ibid
[6] Jyotsna Singh, *Colonial Narrative and Cultural Dialogue: Discoveries of India in the Language of Colonialism*. (Routledge, 1996), 2.
[7] ibid

which themselves are problematically recorded. Representation implies what should be rather than what actually is, a mapping of ideology rather than reality, the process of becoming rather than being-all crucial for arguments about identity and community mobilisation. It was through representations, mainly in print, that stereotypes, images and rhetorical structures were propagated.[8] Similarly Spivak reveals that any theory of representation dealing critically with the domains of ideology, subjectivity, politics, the nation, the state, and the law must attend to the specific discursive uses of the category of gender in order not to generate yet another moment of theoretical epistemic violence.

The concept of representation holds significant historical importance, particularly when the subject of 'women in print' is discussed. However, to fully comprehend this, it is essential to examine women's own roles and their associations with both politics and print culture. Several scholarly works have highlighted that women in colonial India, particularly after the 1920s, were not only active as readers but also emerged as significant contributors to the print public sphere. Many women were writing and actively engaging with the newly emerging spaces of public discourse.

To understand the active role of women in print culture, it is essential to examine their increasing participation in the nationalist movement. This connection is crucial, as their association with print cannot be fully grasped without acknowledging their political engagement. The nationalist movement, profoundly influenced by Gandhian ideas and ideologies, sought to transform itself into a mass movement. To achieve this, it became necessary for Gandhi to ensure that the movement reached every household, and to attain this collaboration with the women became essential. Women, in turn, viewed this as an opportunity to assert their presence in national politics—not merely as a contribution to the nation, but as a fight for individual dignity and recognition. However, women's participation in the national movement was not homogeneous in its nature because each woman had a distinct understanding and definition of nationalism because socio-economic factors were working behind this understanding. For instance, Gandhi associated khadi with national identity, transforming it into a powerful symbol of resistance. What is particularly interesting here is that women from different caste and class backgrounds engaged with khadi in diverse ways. On one hand, upper-caste Brahmin women were symbolically dressing their deities in khadi, treating it as an ideological expression of devotion to the nation. On the other hand, tribal and lower-class women were actively involved in the production of khadi, for whom it held primarily economic significance.[9] Despite this wide spectrum of participation, certain sections of society continued to criticize women's involvement in popular politics, fearing that such visible and active participation might eventually challenge the entrenched structures of patriarchy.[10]

Beyond ideological contestations and women representation in print, the 1920s also witnessed a profound transformation in women's relationship with print culture. Because women, during this period, were not merely readers but also active contributors to journals and newspapers.[11] Here, the historical questions that arise are: how critical were women in their writings, what subjects did they address, and what was their perspective on the politics of representation that men were engaged in while narrating matters about women? Although their early writings did not overtly challenge patriarchal norms, they nevertheless

[8] Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity and Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 11.
[9] Aparna Basu, *Women in Satyagraha*. (Public Division Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2018).
[10] Ruchira Gupta, *Gandhi and Women in Indian Freedom Struggle*. (Social Scientist, 2019).
[11] Shobna Nijhawan, *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere: Periodical Literature in Colonial North India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

marked a significant shift by sharing discursive space with male reformers. This strategic engagement laid the foundation for a separate and autonomous female voice within the public sphere.

Similarly, women's writings demonstrate how early women writers navigated patriarchal constraints rather than directly confronting them.[12] Initially framed through familial identities—mothers, wives, and daughters—they gradually began to articulate themselves a shared political and intellectual identity. Francesca Orsini in her work emphasises that women's journals were instrumental in expanding access to historical and political knowledge, often more so than formal education, and played a central role in the 'Politicisation of women.'[13]

Along with this aspect, it is also essential to analyse the differences in narrative writings when men were writing about women and when women were writing about themselves. For this, we have rich scholarship which provides important insights into this dynamic. when male writers and editors represent women, their narratives are inevitably shaped by their own ideological beliefs, social positions, and unconscious anxieties.[14] These factors influence not only what is written but how it is written—affecting language, imagery, and editorial choices. Because of this it becomes essential to interrogate both the institutional stance of the writing and the personal ideologies of their contributors when examining gender representation.

Conclusion

Taken together, this body of scholarship underscores the complexity of women's representation in colonial India, particularly within print culture. The colonial project did not merely impose political domination; it also sought to construct a new epistemological order that redefined key concepts such as home, society, identity, sexuality, conjugality, and even the idea of obscenity. Through this redefinition, the colonial state produced a moral and social framework that simultaneously justified its civilizing mission and determined the parameters within which Indian women could be represented and governed. Thus, women's representation became deeply entangled with the production of colonial knowledge and power. It also becomes evident that the primary objective of the colonial state was never the genuine upliftment of women; rather, women's issues were strategically employed as instruments to legitimize imperial authority. The British continually altered their vocabulary of rule according to the political and social exigencies of the time, and with these shifts, portrayals of women in colonial writings also underwent significant transformation. By the latter half of the eighteenth century, as the East India Company evolved from a mercantile enterprise into a territorial power, the generation and institutionalization of specific forms of knowledge became central to sustaining colonial control—discourses that aimed not only at governing the land but also at disciplining the native mind and consciousness.

At the same time, nationalist responses to colonial domination revealed another layer of contradiction. During a period marked by political crisis and economic drain, nationalist leaders appeared receptive to reforms concerning women—not necessarily out of genuine commitment to gender equality, but because such reforms were essential to proving that Indians were morally and socially prepared for self-rule. However, even within this reformist discourse, it became apparent that Indian men remained deeply invested in preserving traditional hierarchies and patriarchal norms. Their foremost concern was to retain

[12] Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism (1920–1940)* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).
[13] ibid
[14] Charu Gupta, *The Gender of Caste: Representing Dalits in Print* (University of Washington Press, 2016)

authority over both public and private domains, ensuring their continued centrality within emerging social and political structures.

Thus, both colonial and nationalist ideologies instrumentalized the question of women to advance their respective political and moral claims. Yet, within this ideological contest, women were not passive subjects. They actively resisted and negotiated these dominant narratives in their everyday lives, striving to assert their agency and redefine their identities. The print medium emerged as a powerful site for this assertion. Women's journals and magazines such as Madhuri, Saraswati, Sultana's Dream, and Chand stand as compelling examples of this resistance against conservative patriarchal norms. These publications reflected a crucial historical moment—when women began to represent themselves through their own voices, rather than relying on male intermediaries to articulate their experiences.

In essence, the intersection of colonial discourse, nationalist reform, and women's self-expression through print reveals a dynamic and contested field of representation. It highlights how women, despite structural constraints, carved out spaces within the colonial public sphere to challenge both imperial and indigenous patriarchies, thereby laying the groundwork for new forms of female subjectivity and self-representation.

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