

# Women Between Empire and Nation: Representation of Women in English and Vernacular Newspapers

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## Abstract

The term “representation” carries significant political and ideological resonance. In the context of colonial India, the representation of women becomes a crucial site for examining how power was articulated and contested. Both imperialist and nationalist forces engaged in distinct yet intersecting projects of representing women. On the one hand, the British colonial state employed the figure of the woman to justify its rule in India, simultaneously redefining notions of modernity, domesticity, marriage, and femininity. On the other hand, nationalist discourses articulated a more culturally rooted representation of women, embedding them within ideas of tradition, morality, and Indianness.

This paper examines these contrasting modes of representation through a comparative study of English and vernacular newspapers. Focusing on *The Pioneer* and *Aaj*—newspapers aligned with imperialist and nationalist ideologies respectively—the study interrogates the period between 1920 and 1940, a phase marked by intense ideological struggle within the colonial public sphere. During this period, newspapers functioned not merely as vehicles of information but as active ideological apparatuses, constructing narratives that sought to normalize particular worldviews while delegitimizing competing ones.

Further, the paper critically analyzes how both newspapers instrumentalized the figure of the woman to assert ideological superiority, which constitutes the second major theme of this study. Whether through representations of social reform, domesticity, or civic virtue, women emerged as symbolic sites upon which the contest between imperial “modernity” and nationalist imagination was staged. By tracing shifts in representational patterns and narrative strategies over time, this paper aims to reveal how gendered symbolism was deployed to strengthen ideological positions and consolidate discursive power within the colonial public sphere.

**Keywords:** Representation; Imperialist; Nationalist; Indianness; Newspaper *Aaj*; Newspaper *Pioneer*; Modernity; Women

## Introduction

The Indian national movement and the struggle to free the country from colonial authority was a long and arduous process that demanded the soul, blood, sweat, and commitment of countless individuals. Women constituted one of the most significant groups within this struggle. They not only shaped their sons into patriotic and nation-oriented individuals, but also actively contributed to the freedom movement themselves. Their participation extended across both private and public domains, challenging conventional boundaries of gendered roles (Björkert, 2006; Kishwar, 1985).

This paper seeks to examine women's participation and representation during the nationalist movement through three major thematic concerns.

First, it explores how the two dominant powers—imperialists and nationalists—conceptualised gender and viewed women as subjects within their respective ideological frameworks. It interrogates their attitudes towards women's participation and highlights how women as a category gained greater visibility in the public sphere after the 1920s (Ray, 2000; Sangari & Vaid, 2006).

Second, the paper analyses the representation of women in print culture, particularly newspapers in both English and vernacular languages. It examines how women were portrayed across social, political, and cultural domains, and how newspapers functioned as ideological tools in shaping public opinion (Orsini, 2002; Ghosh, 2016).

The third and most significant theme focuses on women's own writings and their efforts to create space for themselves within print culture. It investigates the subjects women addressed, the issues they foregrounded, and the crucial differences between representations of women by imperialist and nationalist powers and women's self-representation (Nijhawan, 2012; Gupta, 2018).

### **Imperialist and Nationalist Discourses: Women as a Subject**

British control over India was not merely territorial or political; it was also ideological in nature. Imperialist ideology justified colonial rule through the claim that British governance aimed to civilise and discipline an allegedly barbaric and uncivilised Indian society (Singh, 1996; Sinha, 2006). Women became central to this discourse. Colonial narratives frequently portrayed Indian society—both Hindu and Muslim—as inherently oppressive towards women, casting Indian men as morally degenerate and incapable of respecting women (Sangari & Vaid, 2006; Ray, 2000).

This discourse was further strengthened after the publication of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, which asserted that the condition of Indian women had improved only under British rule (Mayo, 1927). Her infamous formulation—that white men and women were saving brown women from brown men—was appropriated by the colonial state as a moral justification for continued domination (Sinha, 2006). Indian society was thus represented as backward and in need of civilising reforms, while Indian women were positioned as passive recipients of British benevolence. This framing became particularly prominent in the post-1920s period.

In contrast, nationalist responses sought to challenge this colonial narrative. Nationalist thinkers argued that Indian society had possessed modern values since ancient times. However, an important distinction emerged within this discourse: Indian women were presented as modern, yet rooted in Indianness. Nationalists reimagined women as “different but modern,” drawing upon religious and cultural traditions to articulate an alternative vision of modernity distinct from Western norms (Ray, 2000; Sarkar, 2001). Women thus came to symbolise both continuity and reform, embodying a culturally rooted national identity.

These contrasting imperialist and nationalist perspectives dominated the ideological landscape during the freedom struggle. Yet, women's actual participation in the process of decolonisation complicates both narratives. Women played a crucial role in balancing domestic responsibilities with public political engagement, a balance that Gandhi considered essential for achieving *Azad Bharat*. Moreover, mass movements acquired a pan-Indian character and reached households across the country largely due to women's active involvement and courage (Björkert, 2006; Basu, 2018).

### **Women, Print, and Newspapers: A Critical Study of Aaj and The Pioneer**

The second major theme of this paper examines the representation of women in two newspapers aligned with contrasting ideologies. The first is Aaj, a Hindi-language newspaper established by Shiv Prasad Gupta in 1920 at Varanasi, closely associated with nationalist ideology. The second is The Pioneer, an English-language newspaper founded by George Allen in 1865 in Allahabad, inspired by imperialist perspectives.

Historically, newspapers functioned as crucial instruments for disseminating ideology and shaping public discourse (Orsini, 2002; Ghosh, 2016). An examination of how women were narrated in these publications reveals the ideological priorities of both colonial and nationalist projects.

In its early years, Aaj primarily focused on women's issues within the private domain. However, over time, its narratives became increasingly politicised. A notable example is its coverage of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. During this tragedy, Shrimati Ratna Devi lost her husband, yet displayed extraordinary resilience by guarding his body for two days. More significantly, she delivered political speeches that sought to awaken the public politically and culturally and to unite people against colonial authority. Despite her personal loss, her commitment to the nation remained unwavering, reflecting her prioritisation of Bharat over individual suffering. Such narratives positioned women as heroines of the freedom struggle, embodying the spirit of Bharat Mata.

By the late 1920s, Aaj adopted a more explicitly political tone. Women were increasingly represented as vital agents of communal harmony and national unity, often symbolically associated with spiritual figures such as Mirabai. This conflation of *deshbhakti* (patriotism) with *krishnabhakti* (devotion to Krishna) marked a significant shift in representations of female political agency (Gupta, 2018). These portrayals directly challenge the notion that Indian national movements were exclusively male-driven and that women were excluded from political participation. Instead, women emerged as active participants in public spaces, engaging across social, cultural, and political domains during the process of decolonisation (Sangari & Vaid, 2006; Ray, 2000).

In contrast, The Pioneer maintained a conspicuous silence regarding women's involvement in nationalist activities during the 1920s. This silence was not incidental but strategic. Colonial governance functioned through carefully planned ideological interventions, and the absence of coverage on women's revolutionary participation reflects a deliberate editorial policy. Acknowledging women's political mobilisation would have threatened colonial authority. Instead, The Pioneer devoted extensive space to sports coverage and advertisements, revealing calculated editorial priorities.

Together, the narratives and silences within nationalist and imperialist newspapers highlight the 1920s as a crucial period of political mobilisation in India. Women were not peripheral figures in this process; they were central actors whose contributions were both visible and contested within print culture (Orsini, 2002; Nijhawan, 2012).

### **Women and Their Association with Pen and Paper**

The final theme of this paper focuses on women's relationship with print culture. It examines the issues women wrote about, their engagement with print media, and the nature of their participation in the public sphere. Scholars have highlighted that, particularly after the 1920s, women in colonial India were not merely readers but also active contributors to print culture. They increasingly participated in the expanding public sphere through journals and newspapers.

To understand women's engagement with print, it is essential to situate it within their participation in the

nationalist movement. Influenced by Gandhian ideology, nationalism sought to transform itself into a mass movement, necessitating its penetration into everyday domestic spaces (Fox, 1996). Women's involvement became indispensable in achieving this objective. For many women, participation in the nationalist movement was not only an act of national service but also a struggle for personal dignity and recognition (Ray, 2000; Sangari & Vaid, 2006).

However, women's participation was not uniform. As Aparna Basu argues in *Women in Satyagraha*, women's understanding of nationalism was shaped by socio-economic factors (Basu, 2018). For example, while khadi emerged as a powerful symbol of national identity, its meanings varied across class and caste. Upper-caste women often expressed their nationalism symbolically, such as dressing deities in khadi, whereas tribal and working-class women engaged in its production, associating it primarily with economic survival (Basu, 2018).

Beyond ideological debates and representation, the 1920s witnessed a profound transformation in women's engagement with print culture. Shobna Nijhawan's *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere* demonstrates that women were increasingly active contributors to periodical literature (Nijhawan, 2012). Similarly, Francesca Orsini highlights how women's early writings, initially framed through familial identities as mothers, wives, and daughters, gradually evolved into expressions of shared political and intellectual identities (Orsini, 2002).

This transformation in women's writing reveals a heightened consciousness. Women were politically, socially, and culturally aware of contemporary developments and were not merely observers but integral participants in the nation-making process (Gupta, 2018; Nijhawan, 2012).

## Conclusion

The three themes discussed in this paper clearly demonstrate that women were not passive followers in the nation-making process but conscious and active agents working at the core of the national movement. By sustaining a balance between the domestic and public spheres, they nurtured nationalist values within the home while simultaneously carrying Gandhian ideas and movements forward in the public domain, particularly during moments when key political leaders were imprisoned.

As Gandhi aptly stated, "When woman, whom we call Abala, becomes Sabala, all those who are helpless will become powerful." It was through the strength and agency of these sabala women that India's transition from colonial rule to Bharat became possible.

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