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MA(S)KING THE WOMAN: CULTURE AND THE BIRTHING OF THE INDIAN WOMAN

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Abstract

If one has to, to any extent, empower women and free them from the shackles that so surreptitiously enmesh them in a manner that they are not even realised, let alone fought against, one needs to understand what goes into ma(s)king a woman. By analysing seemingly innocuous areas like dressing, manner of address, expected behavioural patterns, language and literature constructs and projections as well as religious and social rituals and dogmas, my paper would attempt to shed light on the diverse, yet composite, Indian woman, as she has been given birth to and constructed through culture.

Keywords: Gender, culture, India, constructions of womanhood

Introduction

Culture, as Wendell Pierce, an American actor, has remarked, on Brainy Quote, “is the intersection of people and life itself.” Understood in this context, it is extremely important to work one’s way through the labyrinth of its evolution, if one is to get to its roots and evaluate the dialectics that have emerged through it. As a discipline, culture studies offers us this scope – to understand culture, by distancing from it, in order to dispassionately evaluate what lies at its core; and use this knowledge to further what is sustainable and offers it strength, while discarding what is outdated and outmoded, but is not regarded as such, due to the essential value it derives from being an inheritance, on the one hand, and from, having become a part of instinct, on the other. This evaluation of culture and the constructs it births

is however extremely necessary, if one were to benefit from the anchoring and long standing wisdom it offers, rather than allowing it to become an albatross round one's neck, which, like the Ancient Mariner from Coleridge's poem, one is fated to carry.

It is in this context that the researcher would like to approach the constructions of gender with reference to Indian culture, by taking a step back, to understand it's worth, treasure what is essential and worthy and draw attention to the necessary changes so that, by opening an avenue for discussion, the subject can be brought into the limelight and offered the scope to redeem itself, for, without this, as Terence McKenna has observed in *Your Dictionary*, "we will be caged by our cultural programming."

To a great extent, this is, in fact, what has come to underline the existence of Indian womanhood, vindicating Simone de Beauvoir's belief, as expressed in *The Second Sex*, that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman." While it would be unfair to deny the heights scaled by Indian women today and the fact that the image and role of the Indian woman have metamorphosed significantly, over the years, what is equally true is that, though much has happened, much abides and till the conditioning that defines the making and perception of the Indian woman, by herself and others, is not examined, exposed and deliberated upon, resulting in the necessary changes that this should lead to, the Indian woman would never really achieve her true potential and the stories of success will be the exceptions that would only serve to, if at all, temporarily divert attention from the predominant reality.

In this context, the paper would, by looking at seemingly innocuous areas that attempt to capture the Indian woman, seek to unearth the constructs that, paradoxically, actually define and shape her presence. Through this, the paper would attempt to address the question, whether there is really a difference, at all, between making and masking the Indian woman.

Expected ways of behaviour

Conditioning of a woman or, for that matter, a man, who then perceives her, within a certain framework, constricting her presence, in an attempt to construct it, in fact, begins from the moment of birth, if not prior to it. Coming into a world surrounded by pink (a fad that Indian culture has inherited from the West) as a colour defining her presence, she is gifted dolls, home sets and other such things that befit her gender, being unconsciously kept away from guns, cars, Mechano sets and toys that are believed to be more suitable for male children.

Admired since birth for her pretty looks, beautiful complexion, lovely and delicate figure and sweet voice, the girl has little option than to believe that mildness, being demure and homely are the traits that must form a central part of her personality.

Male children and adult males, in the family, are too chastised and told to understand and value her delicateness and consequently not handle her roughly. Through the growing up years, this further gets accentuated with added qualities of tolerance, forbearance, patience, graciousness, sacrifice and endurance, with the changing stages of life that a girl goes through, as an adolescent, a married woman and a mother. Later in life, this results in an acceptance of dowry harassment, marital rape, wife beating, etc., as a part of her role or destiny. Moreover, not surprisingly, both the men in her life and she begin perceiving herself in this manner, an internalisation, which has become so deep a part of her psyche that she does not think life can be any other way and therefore does not even attempt to consider alternatives.

The latest advertisement of Whisper, being shown on TV in India in 2016, catches this difference in perception beautifully, as young girls perceive themselves as no different than young boys, while young boys, men as well as older girls have a stereotypical perception of what it means to be a woman. Moreover, despite this in itself being extremely disturbing, what is even more so is the observation recorded by the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (The Maharashtra Committee for Removal of Superstition), in the article "Secondary Status Imposed by Religion on Women", which states that "a self-confident woman, who sees through all this 'conjunction' and thinks for herself, is branded flippant or a flirt. The woman who refuses to be 'lesser being' is not acceptable to the society", essentially

because her presence questions and dismantles the edifice of patriarchy that has been so carefully constructed and entrenched over the years.

While people would contest that this is rapidly changing, with the passage of time, and that the Indian woman is a heterogeneous identity, who cannot be confined and captured in such simplistic terms, what is important to note is that, despite these superficial and statistically non representative changes, as Divya Bhargava (2009) in an article bearing the title “Women And Negative Stereotypes: An End Before A Start” notes, “the normative model image of Indian womanhood has displayed remarkable consistency... and perhaps most significantly, these images leave a deep imprint upon women’s self-perception.”

Dressing

Ironically, this perception about womanhood and the image of propriety that a woman internalises, with the passage of time, extends beyond internalising and defending society imposed notions of correctness and appropriateness to becoming an image of the Indian woman that she as well as others hold. Despite this, however, crimes against women continue to be on the rise engulfing both women who kowtow to this image and those who, to varying degrees, deviate from it.

The increasing reports on crimes against women, mainly in the form of rape, have, in fact, sparked a dual debate – one about whether these crimes are in actuality increasing or whether they are just being reported more openly, due to the reduction of the stigma attached to such crimes (though whether that is actually the case is another question altogether); and the other, more disturbing one, whether or not women ‘invite’ rape and molestation by the way they dress. What is upsetting about such a question is that dressing, as a basic aspect of a woman’s life, is not only not out of the scope of scrutiny, but also one about which she often has little or no choice.

So much emphasis is actually placed on dressing, in the context of the Indian woman that, if one were to think about it carefully, one would realise that there is no casual dressing available for women in typical Indian clothes.

Furthermore, the *purdah*, *hijab* or *burqa* – a covering for the woman’s face, head or entire being – that a woman is traditionally expected to wear, are all pieces of clothing that are supposed to mask the sensuality of a woman, reducing her capability of becoming a temptress, who would lead men astray. As the article ‘The Life and Times of an Indian Homemaker’ (2009) states, what is not acknowledged or even realised is that “a woman’s clothing is used to control her. What she wears is treated like a symbol of her respect for tradition, culture, family values, religion, family honour etc. Nobody notices that clothing should be comfortable for this wearer too.” Additionally, it seems to be the responsibility of women and women alone to preserve the tradition, honour and harmony in a family.

Ironically, over and above traditions and families imposing such codes, external agencies beyond even the community have taken up this onus on themselves, with a school near Kolkatta in East India (which is supposed to be one of the forward looking states, having been one of the strongholds of the British rule in India), trying to impose a dress code of a *sari* on the teachers, less than a decade ago; and, when they wore a *salwar-kameez* (an Indian dress that entirely covers the body), despite this, they were heckled not only by the school authorities, but also the parents, students and even the general public and had to go to school under police protection, despite which they were afraid, as, after all, they had to survive within the system. What is most disturbing is that this happened in a school, symbolising a space, in and through which we, as a country, are shaping minds and creating citizens of tomorrow.

Sadly, an extension of this belief was echoed through the words of the Honourable Chief Justice (who is supposed to be a repository and upholder of justice) of Karnataka - a South Indian state who, around the same time, nonchalantly opined, “nowadays, women wear such kind of dresses even in temples and churches that when we go to places of worship, instead of meditating on God, we end up meditating on the person before us” (Chatterji, 2008)

Religious rites and rituals

Given that this is the approach, in as trivial and superficial a matter as dressing, one can only imagine the strictures that religion would place on women - a religion that is not merely constructed by men, who see themselves as its upholders and imposers, but also a facet of community that is abundant in its diversity and a trope that often serves as a core aspect of cultural identity. This paper would basically cover only the Hindu religion, the religion of the majority in India, as also given the restrictions on the length of the paper.

While a Hindu woman is given a place in religious rituals, she is secondary to performing them and serves to merely sit beside her husband, aiding him to complete his obligations by her presence, but she cannot execute these rituals; he – the man - is thus both the upholder and executor of these religious traditions and rituals.

In the Indian epic *Ramayana*, where the protagonist Ram, is asked to remarry, in order to complete a holy sacrifice, as he would need his wife beside him, he chooses rather to cast her in a statue and completes the ritual with her (Sita) beside him, enshrining the woman as merely a presence in the ceremony. In fact, at the end of the epic, he also asks Sita to prove herself, as doubts are cast on her character by a subject in Ram's domain, Ram being an ideal king, thus placing his kingdom above his wife, who has chosen to accompany him to the forest and spend 14 years in hardship, when she could have easily continued to enjoy the comforts of the palace, when Ram had been banished from his father's kingdom.

This secondary status of women is also seen in the context of Draupadi, a character from the other prominent Hindu mythological narrative – *Mahabharata*, who is forced to be the wife to five brothers, as her mother-in-law, without knowing what she is doing, when her sons ask her to turn and see what they have brought home, tells them to share it equally; and they, as obedient sons, decide to share the wife. Further, in the epic, the oldest of the otherwise righteous brothers gambles her off, in a fit of passion and the other brothers do not resist, as they too have been gambled off and thus have no rights. Moreover, when she is dragged to the court and an attempt is made to disrobe her in public, her husbands do nothing to save her, given that they value the principles of the statehood, above their responsibility to their wife and she is left to her own devices, using whatever she can to save herself.

Interestingly, the ideal women, as shown in Hindu mythology, whether Sita, Savitri, Draupadi, Ahalya or Arundhati, are extremely loyal to their husband(s) and obedient, as regards the dictates and expectations that their family and the society at large have from them. As mythological characters, worshipped almost as gods, they seem to define the framework within which an ideal woman is expected to function. Even the 'powerful' goddesses defined in the Hindu pantheon are primarily the consorts of the holy male trinity.

This secondary treatment and place accorded to women, in the context of religion, also manifests itself in the way women are perceived and approached in life. There are varied temples or the inner sanctum of temples, which they are not allowed to visit, like the Ayyappa and Shani Shingnapur temples, because these are temples built to honour bachelor gods or because the power of the aura in the temple's sanctum sanctorum is not considered suitable for a woman. It is in the recent past that the Supreme Court of India has had to intervene, in the case of the latter temple, when women expressed a desire to enter its sanctum sanctorum, granting them, legally, the permission to do so.

Furthermore, instead of being perceived as progenitors of the race and therefore awarded greater respect for it, their menstruation cycle is considered to make them impure, preventing them, during that time from even entering the temple.

When a couple of progressive groups, about a decade ago, trained women to become priestesses, a male priest, from a seemingly progressive city – Mumbai, remarked "how can a woman who undergoes menstrual cycles every month be considered pure to conduct holy rituals?". He further went on to comment, "this is fad of a few misled, urban and so-called elite misguided women who, in defying religious tenets, seek only cheap publicity and to rake in the money." (Lobo, 2014)

In Hinduism, which is a religion essentially considered a male bastion, , most fasts that women observe are also those that they are expected to do for the well-being of their husband and not the other way around. These include the Vatapurnima, Hartalika and Karawa Chauth, to name a few, which are followed as per the lunar calendar and therefore vary, as regards the date and month, in the solar calendar.

Social rites and dogmas

These varied ways of religious discrimination also spill over into the social fabric, with a lot of anti-women attitude, manifesting itself in the form of foeticide and infanticide, in many parts of India, even today, leading to a skewed male-female ratio. In some communities, when a baby girl is born, a mourning ritual is held. This is largely done because, till date, the custom of dowry exists, across communities. This means that the father of the bride has to not only incur all expenses of the marriage, but also give away a significant number of gifts and/or a considerable amount of money to the groom, for accepting his daughter's hand in marriage. Even the ritual of solemnising the marriage, is known as 'kanyadaan', which, translated literally means 'donating the daughter', as if she were a thing or a piece of property to be given away.

Consequently, parents are reluctant to both bear a baby girl (fearing the huge expense on her marriage) and educate her (looking at it as an additional, unnecessary expense, as after all she is to marry and go into another home). Even in seemingly qualified families, the daughter is thus looked upon as a 'burden' and grows up considering herself to be so, as Lipi Mehta (2015) records in her article.

Moreover, in the social structure, only a married woman or a young girl, who hasn't reached puberty, have a special place in the Hindu traditions and rituals, whereas a divorcee or a widow and, to a large extent, an unmarried woman are kept out of a large number of social functions, like *haldi kumkum* (where women gather together). These forms of rituals thus make it abundantly clear that a woman has a social standing essentially as a wife, a mother (of a son) or a daughter, thus secondary to a man.

So too, women are expected to display their marital status, by putting *kumkum/sindoor* (a bright red mark on the forehead and/or in the parting of the hair) and wearing a *mangalsutra* (a type of necklace that indicates they are married), whereas men display no such indicators of their status.

Furthermore, women are not expected to be overtly sexual or own up to their sexuality. As Dr. Manjit Kaur (2014) records in an article, "the control over one's sexual desires and the avoidance of any overt display had been the hallmark features of an Indian woman."

In this context, women from the Muslim community, even today, face the terrifying practice of female circumcision, to curtail their ability to derive sexual pleasure, and live under the constant fear of the triple *talaq*, according to which, to divorce them, the husband has merely to utter the word '*talaq*' (meaning divorce) thrice and they are rendered devoid of their marital status.

On a less insidious, but equally offensive note, even the name plates, on the door of the house, usually have only the husband's name on them, demarcating him as the provider, the in-charge of the household, under whose protection and in whose house the women, whether wife, mother or daughter, live; this trend, though, is gradually changing now, especially in the urban areas, possibly because the earning wife contributes to the loan and the property therefore has to be in a joint name.

Also, women are expected to change their surnames to that of their husband's, after marriage; while sometimes even the woman's first name/forename is changed, basically questioning/challenging/changing her entire identity.

Manner of address

Furthermore, women are also addressed with reference to their marital status – the prefix being either *Kumari* (Miss) or *Smt* (Mrs), the more neutral Ms. does not have a representation in many Indian languages.

So too, men usually address a woman not known to them as *bhabi*, i. e. brother's wife, instead of *behen* i. e. sister, thus relating her to themselves, through a man, rather than establishing a direct connection, though there are communities, which use *behen* or *behenji*, adding the 'ji' to show respect.

Language

While the vocabulary used in addressing women is an obvious reference to their status, in the context of the manner of address, the case is not so obvious, as regards language, making its impact and the resultant conditioning more surreptitious and, therefore, difficult to resist or overcome.

Beginning with the different associations of the same word, even today the word surgeon, engineer or doctor is evoking the image of a man, whereas teacher is kindling the image of a woman; it goes on to derivations of a word used to referring to people of the two genders – one a positive connotation and the other a negative one – 'boss' referring to a man, designating his professional success and status and 'bossy' being used to identify women, who prefer to take charge of things. (Paliath, 2016)

So also, as S. Chatterji (2008) points out:

Our cultural vocabulary too suffers from a serious gender bias. Terms like decency, modesty, decorum, and morality assume new meanings when they are assigned to women. If you take a closer look, they are used mostly to refer to women alone. How 'decent' is the sight of men of all ages, shapes and size, nonchalantly moving about in designer Bermudas revealing hairy legs that border on the vulgar?

Literature

This bias, in the 'construction' of a woman, further deepens in literature, where a woman is often cast in stereotypical roles that glorify her – as an ideal mother, wife or daughter, and if she fails, she is branded on the other end of the scale, as lacking in virtue, a woman to be enjoyed and exploited – like the vamp or destroyed, as a witch, sorceress or an evil, machinating woman, who tries to have her own way and does not give in to the expectations of a patriarchal society. Over and above the mythological stories and TV serials, which locally build this image, the children of both genders inherit this bias from the English poems, lessons and even nursery rhymes, which are taught to them at school since English is the language of aspiration and English medium schools are preferred by people across caste, class and religious affiliations in society.,

Moreover, many of these representations, largely the creation of men or women, who have been subtly conditioned over the years, making them believe this to be the haloed truth, depict women as their own worst enemies, by repeatedly showing women in conflict with each other – whether as mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, co-sisters or sisters-in-law. Not surprisingly, this bombardment also takes place through multiple media – literature, TV and advertisements – leading people to believe it to be the only reality.

Even when, in fact, men are shown to cherish women and script odes to them, the reference is more in the context of them being treasures to be carefully and safely stowed away, in order to guard their value. What goes unnoticed is that the restrictions imposed on women are because they are 'treasures' needing protection, justifying in a twisted way the restrictions imposed on them, even if apparently these seem to be a glorification and valuing of women. A poem in a local Indian language – Marathi offers such a tribute to women, wherein a father tells his daughter, who questions him about the restrictions imposed on her in an attempt to justify the restriction imposed on her.

“.....daughter
You are my casket of diamonds

Where am I wrong, in taking care of you
For after all the beauty and shine in my world
Is thanks to you”

. To this, the daughter, overwhelmed by this comparison, responds without reading into its unstated other

“Dad, please stop
I can’t bear to hear any more
I have no further complaints against you
I will now learn to preserve myself, as a treasure
And bring dazzle into people’s lives wherever I go.”

(Poet unknown, translation mine)

There is no denying however that, over the years, with a greater number of women writers coming into their own, across genres – Shashi Deshpande (1938-), Kamala Markandeya (1924-2000), Kamala Das (1934-2009), Anita Desai (1937-) and the next generation including the diasporic writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1956-), Shauna Singh Baldwin (1962-), Anita Rau Badami (1951-) et al - as also with male writers, who are empathetic to women and their concerns, the issues related to women that have been dealt with in literature as also the way women characters are portrayed have undergone significant change.

Having said that, however, a lot more needs to be done if one were to even create an awareness of the gender stereotyping, let alone change way the women are perceived, treated and the expectations that are imposed on them, especially by the audio-visual media, including films (and the songs in them), television and advertisements, which have maximum impact, given that they have a larger exposure and following.

Conclusion

Against this backdrop, Simone de Beauvoir’s statement “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” loses the paradox it seems to embody and serves rather as a statement that is unquestionably and undoubtedly true. What needs to be done, if one were to bring about an awareness, let alone change this despicable reality is to, as A. Paliath says, “talk about this with EVERYONE.”

While there is no denying that the plight of women, across the world, let alone in India, has changed with time, what needs to be kept in mind is the larger picture – that, even today, the women who scale the dizzy heights of success are few and far between. Despite being talented, they have to, as the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Committee observes, “put up a hard struggle against discrimination at every step. Swimming against the current, as do these brave women, is not possible for (most) ordinary women”, given that they are too oblivious, too busy to challenge the system or caught in it or then too scared to resist.

What needs to be remembered is that, as Behtash and Sajjadi (2012) point out,

To be liberated, a woman must feel free to be herself, not in rivalry to man, but in the context of her own capacity and her personality. We need women to be more interested, more alive and more active, not because they are women, but because they comprise ‘half the human race.’ Whether they like it or not, they cannot escape their responsibility nor should they be denied its benefits.

After all, the Indian woman will be an unmasked and self-made being, the shaper of her own future and that of others, who cross her life if, as captured in *Gitanjali*, by Rabindranath Tagore, she chooses to,

float her lit lamp “to join the carnival of lamps”, rather than handing it to the men, who urge her to part with it, allowing the lamp of her strength and identity to blend unidentifiably, in the crowd, representing her as a person, rather than making her stand apart as a woman.

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