BETWEEN RESISTANCE AND CONFORMITY

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Abstract: Post-colonial discourse informed the literature of colonial India that aimed at subverting colonial oppression. Women too were heavily influenced by the anti-colonial, resistance movements and actively participated in the struggle for freedom. Writing was a major ideological tool that women deployed to counter colonial hegemony. But, were nationalism and resistance to colonization the imperatives of every woman writing in colonial India? The paper seeks to de-establish the homogenizing assumptions that interpret every writing located in colonial India as writings of resistance. It problematizes the politics of representation through various dialectical entry points of orientalism, post-colonial criticism, feminism, marxism etc. It deals with the works of Cornelia Sorabji, the first Indian woman advocate, who also lead an enquiry into the modalities of Indian femininity by researching on *zenanas,* the female exclusive enclosed spaces in muslim households and representing these women before law. Sorabji's derision of women nationalists as a threat to pure Indian femininity is a shocking example of the complex collisions that took place in the ideological formations of feminine identity in colonial times, which were much more than simply anti-colonial struggles. Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu too are discussed in the paper and their works analysed to problematize hitherto unequivocal interpretations that associated their work with resistance to the British hegemony.

Keywords:femininity, hegemony, orientalism, post-colonial criticism

Introduction: Late Nineteenth century and early twentieth century colonial India are important epochs to understand the clash, as well as the coalition of colonial modernity and indigenous traditions in India, resulting in a flux in the cultural identity of Indian women and construction of Indian femininity. An analysis of the literature of Indian women writing in these times gives an insight into socio-political structure of colonial India, its effects on the consciousness of Indian women, and various clashing emblems of Indian femininity, manufactured by this literature. The hitherto conceived superficial practise of associating every Indian literature in colonial times to post-colonial resistance is debunked by a critical reading of certain Indian women's literature in colonial India, that ironically, is heavily influenced by western, Victorian, Romantic and aesthetic traditions in its sensibility, diction, language and many other aspects, to the extent that it consciously or unconsciously happens to romanticize or exoticize and even appropriate the indigenous Indian tradition and femininity, and in few cases, reverberates colonial hegemony. Though, what rescues some of these works from blatant accusations of western emulation and being the agents of colonial hegemony is their ultimate manifestation into resistance, but not every Indian woman's work was fortunate enough to be translated into resistance, for the reason that resistance might not have been their conscious agenda.

Cornelia Sorabji(1866-1954), the first female advocate from India, wrote her autobiographies *India Calling*(1934) and *India Recalled*(1936), during the time when the traditional image of an Indian woman was getting redefined with an upsurge of Nationalism which had penetrated into hitherto unreachable and enclosed boundaries of 'zenana', symbolic of female exclusivity in Islam, and instigated women to participate in the nationalist struggle, altering the socially alien and passive image of Indian femininity into activism. Sorabji views zenanaas a forgotten, dilapidated, abandoned monument, a memory of authentic Indian femininity, victimized by the nationalistic politics, that transformed and marred the traditional image of Indian woman into revolutionaries and terrorists.

Antoinette Burton calls Sorabji not a resistant actor, but a female cosmopolitan traveler, who can delineate the complex interaction of the local and colonial structures(Burton 146). She labels her, elite, educated, England returned Parsi Christian, and highlights an absence of an insight into the nuances of Indian reality and femininity. Therefore, her analysis of Indian socio-political scenario translates into an appropriation, under the alibi of representation. Sorabji through her autobiographies is attempting to establish herself as an infalliable ethnographer and sociologist, by delineating zenana in a way that presents it as an unexplored mystery, hitherto sedimented, and Sorabji's discovery as unprecedented (Burton 146). There underlies an attempt to establish her superiority and indispensability by appropriating zenana and 'pardahnashin' as she represents them in front of the

law. She calls *India calling* a 'record' and a 'survey', and these very words affirm her political purpose and ambition to establish her competence, expertise and her unprecedented position as the first Indian female advocate. Burton comments, " She now saw herself as more of a legal sociologist, referring to India calling as a 'record' and a 'survey' and cataloguing her cases into a series of categories designed to render 'my parsahnashin' the right and proper objects of juridical surveillance." Though, she felt the need to represent them, be their voice in legal cases and rescue them from deviousness and deception of male relatives, but in that process, she reverberates the silencing, patronizing and misrepresenting that they were subjected to by their male relatives. She doesn't acknowledge their voices or let them speak, rather speaks for them and in the process appropriates them. An unequivocal exegesis of zenana, affirmation of representation and declaration of herself as the ultimate recorder of zenana reality, further mutes the veiled women.

Through Burton's description of Sorabji's account, it seems like Sorabji extols the idea of zenana that for her is an authentic symbolic of femininity and Indian tradition as it offered enclosure, timelessness and isolation from the external, cosmopolitan world that is in a constant state of flux, convulsion and bewildering transience. The most bewildering irony lies in the fact that a woman who herself had enjoyed autonomy, recognition and identification in a male dominated domain of law, and became the first woman advocate, was lamenting the modern post-colonial Indian women's struggle for the same. This renders her dialectic, motives and beliefs ambiguous and hypocritical. She romanticizes the contrast between her own life as a traveler and a cosmopolitan, and the life of orthodox zenana women in their own world of timelessness. She finds a strange liberty in this enclosure. There can be a possibility that Sorabji either fails to discern or deliberately obscures the stifling confinement, silencing and deprivation freedom that zenana afflicted upon pardahnashin women, and constructs a very utopian discourse of zenana where they are idyllic , enclosed spaces of female exclusivity, that provide a sanctuary from the perils and baffling chaos of the external politicized world of nationalism and other political activities. Nationalism for her is the most pernicious threat to isolated serenity of zenana and authentic Indian tradition.

Burton's critique signals at Sorabji'sromanticization and exoticization of India. The 'otherization' of zenana culture is what Sorabji's account resorts to, giving vivid and dramatic description of intrinsic details of the life inside and at the periphery of zenanas- like the exotic modes of transport, pulled by animals or manual labour, and interiors of zenana spaces. Her tone of description is that of a flabbergasted foreigner who is viewing wonders. An 'all female space' is what Sorabji is yearning for, an isolated, utopian idea of femininity, that distances her from realism and makes her romantic and traditionalist. She can't bear the idea of a modern cosmopolitan Indian woman, independently negotiating in a male dominated world and fighting for her space . She delights in the idea of passive, submissive and alienated femininity. Claiming to represent Indian women, she places herself out of the label of Indian femininity. The ideal Indian femininity and tradition that she propagates, do not necessitate her subscription to them. But it is the already oppressed Indian female, now resisting, who should regress to the tradition. As for her, 'indianness' and traditional Indian culture is only about the submissiveness and alienation of women. A strong, negotiating Indian woman is not authentic Indian for her. She is nostalgic and mourns the loss of her misconceived, exotic idea of Indian woman, which are dismantled by the nationalist women. In the late nineteenth century with great changes in the lives of women, the concept of 'perfect wife' was going through convulsive changes and redefinitions, with a movement towards individualism (de Souza 1642). Sorabji dwells in colonially constructed image of fragile, Indian woman and cannot endure any digression from it.

Burton stresses on Sorabji trying to establish herself as the sole means of penetrating into an otherwise difficult and unknown zones of zenana and elevating her importance. Post-colonial feminist GayatriChakravartySpivak's dialectic of 'epistemic violence', holds relevance in this case. (Spivak 279) Like the philanthropic intellectuals, who aim to redeem the Indian scenario, with their western philosophic vision, and claim to be voicing the voiceless subaltern, actually appropriate the subaltern, as the very label 'subaltern' affirms voicelessness of the subject and necessitates representation. This is what Sorabji did, by claiming herself as responsible to voice the victimized pardanasheen, she robs them off their individuality, voice and autonomy and makes their dependence upon her for representation indispensable, which translates into appropriation, for her own motive of sustaining and securing her profession as an advocate of these women, who, if emancipated and empowered themselves, would not require Sorabji.

She also laments the loss of symbolic meaning of vermillion mark, 'sindoor' in progressive Hindu women, who have reduced it to mere cosmetic. She unequivocally delineates the traditional significance of sindoor, ignoring the politics of sexism, gender roles, inequality and male chauvinism that underlie the symbols of matrimony. She mourns the demotion

of this significance of pious symbols of matrimony to mere embellishments.(Burton 148) Sorabji undermines the struggle, determination and perseverance of nationalist women by denouncing their breakaway from the symbols of matrimony and fidelity.

Sorabji mirrors a co-opted weapon of British colonizers to contain the subversive threat from Bengali women nationalists. Sorabji becomes an organic intellectual (Gramsci 10) of colonial hegemony, barring the women nationalists from politics, containing them and attempting to indoctrinate them the ideologies of submission and subservience, through the rhetoric of tradition and femininity. She is the 'aunty-mother' as she calls herself to the pardahnashins, analogous to a silencing figure of a mother moulded by patriarchy.

In contrast to the traditionalist, appropriationistic and hegemonising writings of Cornelia Sorabji are the subversive writings of Indian women writing in Progressive Writer's Association, that comprised of leftist writers writing with anti-imperial and Marxist agendas in 1935(Batra2). One such writer is IsmatChughtai(1911-1991) an Urdu writer, notorious for explicitly picturing the tabooed areas like-homoeroticism and female sexuality in her short story 'Lihalf (The Quilt)' .Unlike Sorabji, Chughtai did not believe in containing and confining women, she rather explored female sexuality and formed a resistant narrative to patriarchal and religious dogmas and traditions. 'Gender' was a constitutive element in Chughtai's work, where she linked domesticity, filial politics and sexuality with societal politics and linked the home and the world, unlike Sorabji who demarcated the two. These later progressive writers like Chughtai and RasheedJahan, can be unequivocally placed in the ambit of post-colonial, feminist, marxist writings, whereas, Sorabji's ideologies remain ambivalent, that superficially seem to celebrate Indian indigenousness, but what underlies is a strong colonial influence and a hegemonic agency.

Meenakshi Mukherjee in her essay *Hearing her own voice: Defective Acoustics in Colonial India*, by centering upon two major poets in colonial India, Sarojini Naidu(1879-1949) and Toru Dutt(1856-1877) and critical responses to their work, rectifies the hitherto erroneous interpretations and representations of their work(Mukherjee 106). She dethrones them from the realm of nationalistic, emblematic and resistance rhetoric, and debunks the critics like AmarnathJha who opined that Toru Dutt's work is emblematic of 'new nationhood'(Jha 33). She frees their work from any nationalist label. She concludes Toru's work as venting out personal anxieties and turmoils, and Sarojini's work as pure aesthetic in some poems or simply representing passivity and agony of Indian femininity, both of them being highly influenced by western Romantic, verse tradition. Meenakshi delves into brief details of both the poet's biographical background to unveil before the readers, their elitist and anglicized upbringing, that reflected in their sensibility and perception, and hence, also informed their style of writing poetry.

Toru Dutt's poem *Sita* , is a great example of the emulation of western literary tradition for the appropriation of Indian subject. (Dutt122). Dutt'sSita is far removed from the epic standards, pious inclinations or nationalist emblematic agendas, and is rather an agent to vent out very personal sentiments, in a language and technicality that imitates European Romantic verse literary forms. It is an Indian subject, appropriated for personal expression and moulded in western colonial fashion, that makes it inappropriate to be considered as pan-Indian. Pertaining to its stylistic technique and vocabulary like 'sylvan', in the poem "Laxman" (Dutt 46), an emulation of Wordsworthian diction, English mass could familiarize with her poetry and pertaining to the subject matter and appropriation of Hindi nouns to Bangla pronunciation like 'joyshtee' instead of 'jaishta' and 'dronacharija', Bengali mass could also familiarize with Dutt's poetry. But Indian nation as a whole is unable to familiarize with Dutt's poetry as it is wanting in any pan-Indian essence.

Sarojini Naidu too indulges in romanticizing and exoticising India in her works, like in *PlanquinBearers*, the entire romantic image of the bride being carried in a palanquin and the labour men gaily carrying her and singing. An aesthetic appreciation of this poem rescues it from a critique of underlying caste and orientalist discourse. D.Shanmugam's technical analysis and critical appreciation of Naidu elevates her poetry beyond temporality, bestowstimelessness upon it, and endows it with eternity.(Shanmugam 3) Also her poem *Pardahnashin* presents a very fragile, infirm and agonized image of Indian woman, manacled by the confinements of veil. Naidu's women lack any poltical enticement or subversive power. They are simply victims of oppressive patriarcy, incapable of retaliation. This entire intrigue of painting such a passive, non resistive image of Indian woman in poetry, is itself potentially subversive. It is a shrewd attempt to get accepted into the patriarchal, traditional, male chauvinist Indian nationalist political scene. She appropriated the patriarchal stereotypes of a fragile woman to come on par with patriarchy itself. Later after relinquishing poetry, she reinvented a motherly image of colonized India in her conferences and formed the discourse of a ravished mother, who needs to be rescued by its nationalist children.

Conclusion: Homogenizing all the diverse writings of Indian women in colonial India into an anti-colonial and nationalistic ambit is a misrepresentation that needs critical inquiry. Writings of a colonized subject are not always necessarily narratives of subversion. They could be narratives of consent, further appropriation of the fellow colonized subjects or subversive appropriation of the dominant symbolic(Mitchell 151), as co-opted by Sarojini Naidu, appropriating both the modalities of oppression, masculinity and colonialism and constructing a subversive discourse.

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