

CHALLENGING THE DISCOURSE OF MOTHER IN BHARAT MATA THROUGH STORIES OF MAHASWETA DEVI

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Abstract

The feminist literature brings to light different ways in which idealized images and real bodies of women are used for the symbolic construction of national collectivity and national boundaries. Women's bodies are presented by the nation as biological and social reproducers and consequently they become battle grounds in nationalist conflicts. Women occupy a significant symbolic place as the mothers of the nation. Their role in nationalism is more often that of a mother, the symbol of national hearth and home. India as a mother entails that the honour of a nation resides in its women, or rather the bodies of its women, hence sexuality of women becomes utmost importance to the nationalists. It is important to note that this honour can reside only in particular kind of female body. This body has to be pure, meaning free from all desires (read sexual desires) and filled with selfless love. The image of Bharat Mata is never that of a Dalit or Adivasi, a Muslim or that of any other minority community. Only an upper class Hindu woman constitutes the fabric of Bharat Mata. This argument is further strengthened by the analysis of select short stories of Mahasweta Devi.

Keywords - Bharat Mata, Indian women, Motherhood, Nationalism, Sexuality

1. Introduction

Golwalkar, in his *Bunch of Thoughts*, implores Hindu women, who without exception are ideal mothers to teach their sons the essentials of Hindu Nationalism, fight the Hindu nation's enemies, but most significantly, desist from being 'modern'. Golwalkar argues, modern women lack in virtue and think that modernism lies in exposing their body more and more to the public gaze.[1]

The chanting of 'Bharat Mata' is not a recent phenomenon, although it has become quite frequent now to portray certain ideology and affiliations. The ability to produce babies gets translated to the economic and cultural prosperity of the nation while as a figurative mother figure, the nation is a nurturing and self-sacrificing entity, that needs to be protected and served.

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never that of a Dalit or Adivasi, a Muslim or that of any other minority community. Only a upper class Hindu woman constitute the fabric of Bharat Mata.

2. Motherhood and Erasure of Sexuality

Sindhubala story by Mahasweta Devi reveals how the status of divine mother is forced on her to escape the stigma of being barren-childless. Sindhubala, the protagonist of the story has no choice but to suppress her own physical and emotional needs. It is only through such self-denial that she can regains her dignity in the society.

Sindhu has always been criticized for her looks, “bulging forehead, snub nose, black skin. Her mother laments that she has no male child. Her husband leaves her because she is ugly and leaves for other women. She returns to her mother’s house. Manudasi, the midwife brings a woman to her house who is looking for someone born with her feet coming out first because such people “could keep children safe from ailments by touching them with her feet” Sindhu’s mother makes use of this opportunity. She realizes that Sindhu’s divinity would be a helpful aid in managing the household expenses. She is bound to earn her livelihood through her image of divine mother otherwise she would suffer by remaining an outcast and poor. She was rejected by her husband because of her physical looks. Paradoxically, this becomes her only instrument to earn her livelihood. Her body becomes divine, so thus people come with their children for a blessing. Even her husband’s another wife came with her son for her blessing. Her barren body becomes a symbol of purity in nature in order to become an idea of supernatural power.

Radha Chakraborty comments, “The narrative of nationalism sought to create an abstract, homogenised figure of woman as mother, to serve a particular political agenda, without any concern for the needs of actual women in different sectors for society”. [2]

Motherhood was taken as a figure for the spiritual essence of national selfhood, as distinct from the material sphere of progress in the definition of motherhood that was evolved in the decades following independence, the elision of femininity and maternity has becoming a determining feature. Motherhood is deified but paradoxically, the myth of the mother’s quasi divine status is premised upon her capacity for voluntary self-denial.

Sindhubala is all isolated and deprived. Later she withdraws herself from supernatural act in order to calm he own mental trauma. She releases herself from social bindings and responsibilities. Her desire to become a ‘real mother’ has never been acknowledged by the society.

“If you’re human, you must burn, If you’re holy, then too you must burn. If life has the same end for both, then why should the woman Sindhu spend her days pretending to be a goddess.”

Motherhood is not open to any questions, therefore they are treated as axioms as ‘nature’ itself by the nationalists, fearing the life of an ‘outcast’ women are forced to embrace motherhood biologically or by becoming a divine mother.

Like a fruitless tree, Sindhu craves for the fulfilment that her plain appearance has played beyond her reach. Discarded by her husband and exploited by her mother, she awakens too late to the realization that her divine status is premised upon hollow self-denial.

3. Motherhood and Clothing

Another story of Mahasweta Devi “Ma, from Dusk to Dawn” portrays the paradox of Divine Mother. The Protagonist of the story Jati is exploited in both her roles as holy mother and divine mother. Jati is ostracized because she married a man outside her community. She struggles to meet her ends and take care of her after her husband’s death. She could not go back to her own community. In order to survive she transform herself into a divine mother possessing powers of prediction and healing. She calls herself “Thakurni”. She is Thakurni during the day and reverts back to being a mother to his son at the night. Her son is mentally retorted and all he could feel is hunger and love. Jati has no choice but to wear the mask of spiritual mother to feed her son.

What is noteworthy here is that the society that ostracized her and merely watched her helpless condition readily accepted her in her divine form, but for her it is a strategy for her survival and to protect herself from sexual violation.

The hypocrisy of the nationalist values in protecting the mothers of our land is revealed here. Bharat Mata / ideal mother / upper class Hindu mother is deserved to be protected. Uncommon mothers like Jati, who are born into low castes, who have no husband to be protected becomes unworthy of protection by men of the nation.

Devi challenges the collective stereotyping in society that perpetrates the myth of divine motherhood. The divine mother is a concept associated with Hindu society and here a tribal women has challenged this discourse as her strategy for her own survival.

The hypocrisy is further revealed when Jati’s son has to beg to conduct her funeral. Having exhausted her usefulness to the society, she is confided to marginalised oblivion.

‘Don’t call me Ma, son, my own dear son’

‘Never?’

‘Late at night, before sunrise, call me Ma

After sundown too you can call me Ma.’

‘Only at dawn and dusk, right?’

‘yes son’

‘At dusk and dawn you’re Ma, And in the

Daytime you’re Thakurni?’

‘Yes son. I’m your dusk to dawn mother.’ [3]

The paradox of society, which continuously forces the woman to make choices, in which even her son becomes a victim is told powerfully through Jati. Her transformation into divine mother Thakurni happens with just a red cloth and a trident that sanyasi presents to her. This cloth and trident makes her a divine mother from human instantly. The lustful looks are replaced by respect.

The whole concept of motherhood / Bharat Mata can be reduced to a matter of clothing. We constantly hear statements from the Hindu nationalists about their concern on Hindu Women's clothing, how they are influenced by 'westernization' and thereby bringing disgrace to the family and nation. Bharat Mata is always a fair skinned, Hinduized, wearing Sari. Bharat Mata can never be a woman wearing Burka or Jeans and Shirt. The messages of nationalism and moralism is advocated through the dresses of Hindu women. The nationalistic notions of decency and social respectability are contested on the bodies of Hindu women.

4. Conclusion

The first systematised effort at controlling women's dress was the swadeshi movement by Gandhi. Susan Bean refers to Khadi as the "fabric of Indian Independence". [4] This attempt at redressing the women is closely connected with the idealized wife and mother. Women were particularly singled out and their clothing was specially scrutinized. Plain, 'unattractive', unadorned dress was claimed by the nationalists to bring a national ethos. By means of controlling women's clothing, morality, private lives of women were controlled by nationalists. Khadi is not just a cloth but a symbol of purity, chastity and idealism these clothes were termed as 'indigenous' and 'traditional'.

This traditional dress creates a difference between bad mother and good mother and makes a relationship between nationalism, gender and clothing. Emma Tarlo says much of Gandhi's difficulty lay in the imperfect nature of his communication through clothes. [5] While clothes, like language, capable of communicating anything from truth to lies, from the intelligible to unintelligible. Their meaning, like meaning itself is open to interpretation and debate. This reveals that there was a partial acceptance of Khadi and the rest were just passive victims of the Khadi movement.

RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat has said that rapes happen only in India, not Bharat (implying that women who embrace western clothes get raped). Jati's clothing played an important role in protecting her from the masculine gaze, But it is her circumstances that made her to transform into this respectful clothing and not out of her choice.

The line, she died of the "highly contagious disease of starvation for which no cure has been found so far in the land of India," reveals her painful death. It is to be noted that Jati's so called mystical powers depend upon her denial of maternal affection towards her own son, during day time. Let the role be biological mother or divine mother, denial of self is essential to be an ideal mother in Mother India.

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