

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone, welcome to yet another lecture of Nation and Narration. In this lecture, we will be looking at the question of women in the 19th century and the emergence of a new category of woman called *Bhadramahila*. The ideas that are used in this lecture are primarily drawn from Partha Chatterjee's famous essay "Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonized Women: The Contest in India."

We already saw in our previous lectures that the colonial administration in India was ideologically warranted by portraying India as a land of administrative anarchy. The natives were made to believe that the contemporary India is in bad shape and the Indians are incapable of effecting a positive change here on their own. The colonial administration opined that only the west could now help India revive from its current dilemma through a civilizing mission. To justify their civilizing mission, which was in fact a cover to hide their imperial agenda, the colonizers embarked on a mission to portray Indian social customs as "degenerate and barbaric." The colonial masters presented that the Indian customs and traditions, sanctioned by religion, always mistreated women. To present Indian tradition as essentially cruel to women, colonial masters always made it a point to foreground a series of atrocities meted out to Indian women by Indian men. Here we should particularly need to note that the pitiful condition of Indian women was not portrayed as the direct result of the actions of any specific men or social classes, but as the result of certain larger systemic injustices embedded in scriptural canons and ritual practices. The imperial masters further argued that these traditional practices that mistreated women were always sanctioned within a religious framework and were made to appear to both perpetrators and victims as essential to their moral conduct. By assuming a position of sympathy towards the supposedly unfree and oppressed women of India, colonial discourses transformed the Indian woman into a symbol of the country's inherently oppressive and unfree cultural tradition. We should remember that the common assumption that underpinned all these efforts was that Indians must ultimately come to see their traditional customs as unworthy and should willingly adopt the values of a civilized and rational social order. The native intelligentsia also believed that the condition of the Indian woman needs to be improved. But the real question was 'how to transform Indian woman's condition.' Can we allow the colonizers transform the identity of Indian woman from mere victims to empowered entities. Initially, seeking the help of the colonizers to improve the condition of Indian woman through legislative activities, such as the laws abolishing sati, etc. were considered a viable option. These approaches to improve Indian women's pitiful condition ranged from the proselytization of Christian missionaries to legislative

and administrative efforts on the part of the colonial state. It was thought that the gradual dissemination of Western knowledge and the legal move from the colonial government will eventually solve the problem.

Although the native intellectuals initially acknowledged and appreciated the role of the reforms in this regard, they soon came to the conclusion that they should take the matters into their hands, as opposed to considering the colonial government as the sole agent of change in India's cultural realm. The primary reason behind taking such a decision was that women's question was something that concerns the domestic affair of Indian society. So, the nationalist intelligentsia decided to fashion a new model of women that suits the requirements of modernity. This new category of woman that the nationalist intelligentsia molded significantly differed from the traditional Indian woman, lower-class woman, and the Western woman. Before we analyze the image of the ideal Indian woman envisioned by the nationalist intelligentsia, let us first examine the criticisms against these three categories of women, namely traditional Indian woman, lower-class women, and the Western woman.

First let us examine the criticisms against the traditional Indian woman. Traditional women were often seen as helpless and stuck in strict cultural rules. They were expected to follow gender roles, stay at home, and give up their own dreams. They had little access to education or money, and religious and social ideas often told them to be quiet, obedient, and self-sacrificing. This image fits well with the colonial critique that Indian women were seen as helpless victims of their own traditions and customs. Colonial writers and reformers often used such portrayals to argue that Indian society was backward and in need of "civilizing." By showing women as oppressed and voiceless, they justified colonial rule as a way to "rescue" them. This kind of portrayal also painted Indian men as inherently oppressive and backward, reinforcing the idea that they were the primary reason for women's suffering. In colonial discourse, Indian men were often shown as the keepers of cruel traditions, incapable of reform or empathy.

During this period, there were also strong attempts to criticise the ways and manners of the lower-class women who were thought to be contrast to moral and spiritual superiority desirable in an ideal Indian woman. The 19th-century literature expressed its contempt towards women from the lower-class such as maids, washerwomen, barbers, peddlers, procuresses, and sex-workers. The common "woman, who was presented as coarse, vulgar, loud, sexually promiscuous, and subjected to brutal physical oppression by males and quarrelsome. She was presented as subjects devoid of superior moral sense. Chatterjee observes, It was precisely this degenerate condition of women which nationalism claimed to reform, and it was through these contrasts that the new woman of nationalist ideology was given a status of cultural superiority to the Westernized women, traditional woman and lower-class woman.

Similarly the image of a western woman was also severely criticized. The emulation of the West by Indian woman was generally considered an undesirable move by the native intelligentsia. The literature on 19th-century Bengali women often expressed this fear of Western influence. The

Indian woman who emulated the West was portrayed as an object of ridicule and humour. Social parody was widely used as a common way to spread the notion that an Indian woman should never go for the complete emulation of the Western culture. Writers and dramatists like Iswarchandra Gupta, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Dinabandhu Mitra, and others explored this theme extensively in their works. The audience, both men and women, found it extremely amusing and morally satisfying. But we should note that the attempts for a total assimilation with the West was mostly an exaggerated idea that did not really exist. Even in the most Westernized families of mid-19th-century Calcutta, such women, I mean the Indian women who got thoroughly westernized, were extremely rare. Still, these portrayals criticized new clothing like blouses, petticoats, and shoes. Ironically, these covered the body more than the traditional single-length sari worn by all Bengali women before the mid-19th century. These criticisms often targeted Western cosmetics, jewelry, reading novels, needlework, and riding in open carriages. Many believed that women's assimilation with the Western cultural values encouraged laziness and wastefulness. The general conception was that Westernized women cared more about luxury than their homes. To highlight this point, Chatterjee quotes from Bhudev Mukhopadhyay's *Paribarik prabandha* [Essays on the Family] published in 1882. According to Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, "Because of our hankering for the external glitter and ostentation of the English way of life ... an up- heaval is under way within our homes. The men learn English and become sahibs. The women do not learn English but nevertheless try to become bibis. In households which manage an income of a hundred rupees, the women no longer cook, sweep or make the bed ... everything is done by servants and maids; [the women] only read books, sew carpets and play cards. What is the result? The house and furniture get untidy, the meals poor, the health of every member of the family is ruined; children are born weak and rickety, constantly plagued by illness-they die early" (625). In the early 19th century, parody and satire defended tradition and completely rejected new ideas. We should remember that this was a period when the concept of nationalism was not yet fully developed in the Indian context. A clear understanding as to how to fashion the national identity was not fully formed. This was also a time of social unrest and ideological confusion among intellectuals, from Rammohun (1772–1833) to Vidyasagar (1820–91). In the second half of the century, a new way of thinking emerged. It drew from different sources and aimed to define the social and moral roles of women in the modern nation. This approach was not based on total rejection of the West or the total embracing of tradition. Rather, it was a process of negotiation and balance.

Now the crucial question emerges—why the nationalist intelligentsia did not want Indian woman to assimilate with the Western woman. Well, there is a reason for that. We have already discussed it. We have seen in our previous lectures that the Western intervention was encouraged only in the material realm of society, while the domestic sphere was declared as the sovereign territory of the Indian culture. As I mentioned before they firmly believed that the material sphere was where Western civilization asserted its greatest influence. It was this dominance in the material realm which enabled them to control and subjugate Indians. To overcome this subjugation,

colonized societies should mandatorily adopt these advanced techniques of the West in the material realm and integrate them into own cultures. This was an integral aspect of the nationalist effort to modernize and reform traditional society. So, science, technology, rational economic organization, and modern statecraft had to be used to reshape the Indian material realm. But, the complete imitation of the West was highly discouraged, especially in the domestic realm which was considered spiritual. The nationalist intelligentsia strongly believed that a complete assimilation with the West would erase the very distinction between East and West and would threaten the self-identity of the national culture. Chatterjee observation in this regard merits attention. According to him, “the Indian nationalists in the late 19th century argued, not only was it undesirable to imitate the West in anything other than the material aspects of life, it was even unnecessary to do so, because in the spiritual domain the East was superior to the West. What was necessary was to cultivate the material techniques of modern Western civilization while retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture. This completed the formulation of the nationalist project, and as an ideological justification for the selective appropriation of Western modernity it continues to hold sway to this day” (623-624).

We should particularly need to remember that that nationalism was not merely a political struggle for swaraj. It was also tied to the nation's quest for fashioning a new cultural identity that is modern, but not western. At every step, a crucial scrutiny was made to decide what to adopt from the West and what to reject. Nationalist intelligentsia strongly argued that the material world existed outside of us. It was conceived as an external realm that has no direct influence upon the domestic or spiritual space. So, the emulation of the West in the material realm was considered non-problematic. In contrast, the spiritual realm or the domestic realm, played a crucial role in shaping our life and character. The domestic or the spiritual was thought to be the true essence of the self or the core of India's identity. The nationalists opined that if India preserves its spiritual distinctiveness, then it can accommodate and adjust to the demands of modern material life without compromising its true nature. This framework provided nationalism with a means of addressing the complex challenges of social reform in the 19th century. It offered a resolution that allowed for modernization while maintaining cultural integrity. This ideological framework that warranted the selective appropriation of Western modernity still continues shapes the nationalist thought.

In everyday life, this inner/outer distinction translates into a clear division of social space between *ghar* or the home and *bahir* or the world. The world or *bahir* was associated with material affairs, practical necessities, and ambition. It was typically seen as the domain of men. The home or *ghar*, on the other hand, was the terrain of spiritual purity, untouched by the corrupting influences of *bahir* or the material world. In this interesting framework, women came to represent the domestic realm or home, while men represented the external world. Women became the visible embodiment of this inner sanctum. She was thought to be the symbol of the home's inviolable purity. This alignment of gender roles with the separation of social space

reinforced the nationalist vision of modernity—one that embraced progress in the external world while preserving the sacred traditions of the inner realm. This negotiation between home and world was also implemented in reforming the Indian woman. Here we should note that the reformation of Indian women in the late 19th century should be not be understood in the conventional framework of a progression from conservatism to full agency and freedom. Rather, it has to be understood as a process of negotiation.

Now what is the image of the ideal Indian woman that the nationalist intelligentsia wanted to create. The new woman that the nationalists wanted to fashion was the kind of woman who embraces modernity in the material sphere without negating the traditional Indian values. She is educated, but is bound by traditional norms of modesty, devotion and domesticity. A *bhadramahila* will be highly educated, she will be actively engaged in social reform, she will share the public space with her husband, she will travel by public conveyances, but she will always subordinate her public intellectual life to her role as a devoted wife and mother. Unlike a modern western woman who challenges gender norms or unlike a traditional woman who effaces her position in public, a *bhadramahila* operated along the liminal space of freedom and control. A *bhadramahila* had only the compromised agency. Her empowerment was shaped and constrained by her role in the domestic sphere. She was given education and limited participation in the public sphere, hoping that that she would uphold her traditional gender roles like that of a caregiver, nurturer and son on. As opposed to Westernized women or lower-class women, a *bhadramahila* was expected to represent national identity through her morality and self-discipline. Thus she became a crucial symbol of cultural resistance against colonial rule.

Education played a crucial role in the making of *bhadramahila*. Here we should not that she was given education not to emancipate her and make her aware of her rights, but to equip her to run the modern household. Chatterjee observes, “Education then was meant to inculcate in women the virtues . . . of orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy, accounting and hygiene and the ability to run the household according to the new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world” (629). Kundamala Devi’s observation that Chatterjee cites in this essay is worth exploring here. She says, “If you have acquired real knowledge, then give no place in your heart to memsaheb-like behaviour. That is not becoming in a Bengali housewife. See how an educated woman can do housework thoughtfully and systematically in a way unknown to an ignorant, uneducated woman. And see how if God had not appointed us to this place in the home, how unhappy a place the world would be [cited in Borthwick 1984, p. 10]. The modernity of *bhadramahila* was always contingent upon her devotion to the spiritual values. According to Chatterjee, “Once the essential femininity of women was fixed in terms of certain culturally visible spiritual qualities, they could go to schools, travel in public conveyances, watch public entertainment programs, and in time even take up employment outside the home” (629).

The "new woman" or “*bhadramahila*” as conceptualised by the native elites was clearly a product

of the new patriarchy that significantly differed from its predecessor, the old patriarchy. The older form of patriarchy exercised control over women through explicit mechanisms, such as strict social norms, legal restrictions, and explicit dominance within the household and public life. It openly prevented women having from autonomy and freedom, and relegated them to subordinate roles with almost no space for negotiation. This kind of patriarchy was widely criticized, especially by colonial authorities. They firmly believed that the patriarchal forms in the colony was a clear manifestation of oppressive and regressive nature of indigenous traditions. To counter these charges, the native elites in the colony wanted to thoroughly reform the old patriarchy. Thus, a new form of patriarchy was formed. This does not mean that the new, reformed form of patriarchy did not aim to condition and control native women. Although it continued to curb women's agency, its operation was in a more subtle and indirect manner. Unlike the overt constraints of the old patriarchy, this new system allowed women to have education. They were given ample opportunities to participate in public events. But in spite of all these apparent celebrations of women's freedom, it continued to confine women within an idealized, moralized domestic sphere. The new patriarchy did not need to enforce control through explicit subjugation; instead, it functioned through cultural ideals, reinforcing the notion that a woman's true power lay in her role as the guardian of tradition and national identity. Although the new patriarchy appeared more progressive and liberating than the older system, it was still a system of control. It clearly maintained male dominance by defining the limits of women's empowerment. Critics pointed out that by granting women limited freedom, while keeping them bound to larger cultural ideals, the new patriarchy remained deeply oppressive. It is just that the new patriarchy masked itself under the guise of progress and reform. Chatterjee observes: "The new woman defined in this way was subjected to a new patriarchy. In fact, the social order connecting the home and the world in which nationalists placed the new woman was contrasted not only with that of modern Western society; it was explicitly distinguished from the patriarchy of indigenous tradition, the same tradition that had been put on the dock by colonial interrogators. Sure enough, nationalism adopted several elements from tradition as marks of its native cultural identity, but this was now a "classicized" tradition-reformed, re-constructed, fortified against charges of barbarism and irrationality" (627).

So far, we have been talking only about reforming the mind of the new woman. During this period, there were also many attempts to aestheticize the body of the new woman. It was widely considered that the traditional garb and conventional body of native women would be found repulsive by modern educated men. To remedy this, women were asked to adopt modern dress. Aestheticising the female body, that is adorning it with the markers of culture, was thought to be of equal importance as the process of culturing the mind. J Devika's article "The Aesthetic Woman: Re-forming Female Bodies and Minds in Early Twentieth-Century Kerala" is an interesting article that throws light on the politics of aestheticizing native woman's body in the colonial context. According to Devika, the traditional elements of dress that the native women were wearing came to be considered primitive, unpleasant, and unhygienic. The modern attire

that was not completely western, say for example an attire like *sari*, was found appealing, cultured, and clean. The native intelligentsia believed that a healthy body alone was not sufficient to attract a modern man. The healthy body had to be aestheticized and “clothed in culture.” Hygiene of the female body was promoted not merely for health benefits but, more significantly, as a powerful means of enhancing the female body’s attractiveness. The re-formation of the body in an aestheticized manner was one of the major concerns of the native elites in the country. Devika quotes the words of V.T Bhattatirippadu in this context. According to V.T, “Many of us are turning head over heels about this (i.e., about intra-caste marriage) not because of our fascination for your sense of beauty, but merely out of a concern for morality. I do not hide the fact that many of us who are married are fed up of your ugly, disgusting dress and ornamentation, and are able to do no more than curse ourselves” (480). V.T. was not alone in emphasizing this need. His views resonated throughout reformist discourse on dress-reform for traditional women. The aestheticized body was also considered a crucial element in solidifying the modern, monogamous marital bond. Wearing new forms of dress was not only advocated as a means of achieving sexual self-restraint but was also seen as a way to heighten the aesthetic appeal of the female body, aligning it with the ideals of modernity and cultured domesticity. We will discuss this aspect in detail soon when we talk about the sartorial reforms in colonial India.