

**NPTEL**  
**Nation and Narration**

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**Transcript from the Video**

Hello everyone, in the previous lecture we saw the formation of the special category of woman called bhadramahila. We saw that a bhadramahila was a special category of woman who is conspicuously different from traditional Indian woman, lower-class woman and Western woman. In this context, we also saw that the women's freedom was contingent upon many factors. As long as the new woman retained her femininity and she performed her conventional gender roles, she was allowed to be visible in the public sphere, travel by public conveyances and even educate herself. The article that is going to receive our maximum attention in this lecture is Himani Bannerji's "Textile Prison: The Discourse on Shame or Lajja in the Attire of the Gentlewoman in Colonial Bengal." Although the essay is specific to Bengal, the situation was not much different from the modern upper class circles in the pan Indian scenario. The material that Bannerji employs to substantiate her point is women's own writings, particularly in periodicals and magazines. She uses these periodicals as a lens to get a good glimpse into the moral discourses they articulated, as part of their self-fashioning. By analyzing these sartorial changes within the framework of class dynamics and gendered moralities, Bannerji highlights clothing as both a social marker and a site of agency.

In the 19th century, there was a strong attempt in the modern upper class circles to develop a moral-sartorial project for the construction of the gentlewoman or bhadramahila of Bengal. The physical exposure of women was heavily criticised, and attempts were made to hide the female body in a textile enclosure. It was often thought that a bhadramahila or a gentle woman was expected to dress herself differently, behave differently, and embody another morality and aesthetic. She was expected to represent a unique morality and aesthetic, in contrast to the perceived "vulgarity" of a female body casually draped in a semi-transparent garment. We all know that the nineteenth century was a period of reforms, based on the assumption that the current state of the Indian society was marked by "the degradation and the decadence" and was in sharp contrast to an ideal modern society. At the centre of these reformist activities were often women and gender relations prevailing in the family. Tanika Sarkar's observation in this connection merits special attention here. In her article, "Hindu Conjugalities and Nationalism in Late Nineteenth Century Bengal, she is of the view that that the Bengali male intelligentsia's concern for the social upliftment of the women in their society almost boarded on obsession. Attempts to improve the lives of middle-class women through refining their minds, morals, and household roles were often considered essential for the progress of society itself. It was thought that both the refinement of women's mind and their social status should go hand in hand.

Initially home or grha was seen as the proper place for women. While women were expected to manage household duties, men engaged in the outside world. However, as ideas of social reform emerged, there was growing demand for a change in this rigid divisions. The reformers often considered the invisibility of women in the houses as a marker of primitive society and emphasised the need for women's freedom to participate in activities beyond household. Reformers proposed a new vision of the home or griha as a shared emotional and

moral space for both men and women, as opposed to keeping them in two separate domains. The reform efforts for women's education and their participation in public life were often met with strong opposition from the conservatives. The real concern of conservative elites was not just women's public presence, but the challenge these changes posed to the existing social and gender roles. With this shift, clothing also had to be changed. As women started stepping out into the public sphere, their dress needed to reflect their class and respectability. These sartorial changes were thus thought to be necessary.

We should not think that this was the concern solely shared by the traditional conservative elites. Even the so-called progressive male reformers also had the same anxiety, when it came to women and the family. But the only difference between these two was that while the first one completely opposed the women's emergence to the public sphere, the second one aimed for a neat negotiation. While the progressive male reformers supported women's education and public presence, they also made it a point to control and limit these changes. For the liberals also, the female body, women's sexuality, and their role in society were deeply unsettling matters, just as they were to conservatives. It is significant to note that the primary agenda behind these reformist activity was not a strong desire to improve the condition of women. The reformers primarily wanted to counter the European claims that Indian society was "uncivilized" and the traditional attire of women was a marker of it. By dressing women in "civilized" attire, they wanted to counter this European allegation without truly challenging patriarchy. It is interesting to note that even female reformers, like Krishnabhabini Das, who supported some financial independence for women, still saw the home or *grha* as the primary and natural space for woman. Reformers allowed women education and limited public presence, but at the same time maintained a patriarchal structure, considering modesty as a key virtue. So we can say for certain that changing women's clothing was not just about fashion—it was a way to control and contain the fear of women stepping beyond traditional roles. Tanika Sarkar's observation is important in this connection. In her article, "Hindu Conjugalities and Nationalism in Late Nineteenth Century Bengal," Sarkar says,

"When we look at the nineteenth-century household manuals and contrast them with the ancient ... we find that the real point of departure in our material relates not so much to the strategies of control, but to unprecedented possibilities in the conditions of the women's existence." (1989: 3).

So, the bottom line of the argument is that a large part of the reformist movement vis-à-vis the women's question was part of a patriarchal project by which the elite, native men wanted to counter the orientalist claim that the native women were vulgar and uncivilized.

From the 1860s onward, one can clearly notice the nationalist desire to come up with a dress code for women that is not western and traditional. There was a growing tension, says Banerjee, between native Bengali and European styles of dress. Bengali women's traditional attire was considered too revealing, while European clothing was seen as foreign. In fact the European gown would have been perfectly suitable to cover the vulgarity of the body, since it covered the body from the neck to toe. But adopting the western attire would be tantamount to assimilating with the west and losing Indianness. In the initial phase, there were indeed some attempts by the elites to experiment with Western fashion, but this was short-lived, to be soon replaced by a conscious attempt to create a culturally "authentic" national style. Swarnakumari Debi and others were in the vanguard of this movement in Bengal, leading to the widespread acceptance of the sari. This choice merged feminine modesty with *deshiata* or indigenous identity, reinforcing a controlled, "proper" female sexuality. Writings in women's magazines at the time reveal how clothing was directly linked to moral expectations, as

Soudamini Khastagiri in her essay 'Women's Clothes' in published in Bamabodhini Patrika observed.

“Relatively speaking [relative to wearing one piece of cloth] clothes of nations such as those of the English may be better. But in some aspects they are a thousand times worse than ours. Therefore, if we seek to imitate them, we get rid of some faults only to embrace their deficiencies. (1872b: 150).

She is of the view that wearing European clothes is indeed a betrayal of national identity and points out the necessity of culturally appropriate femininity. For her, adopting Western attire is not only hypocritical, but unnatural for Indians. Her words are noteworthy in this context. She in the same essay further opines, “It is never as enjoyable to imitate clothes of other nations, as to create one from one's imagination, and which is suited to both national characteristics and is also civilized. And besides, there is a sense of artificiality if Bengalis wear the clothing of English or any other nation. They are considered of that culture and are treated as such. If a Bengali person dresses like the English and frequents their society, they engage in reviling the Bengalis in front of him, which he has to listen to with patience” (1872b: 150).

Shabhyata (propriety) and shalinata (courtesy) were the two major concepts which shaped the moral foundations of nationalist fashion. This "national" and morally upright attire played a crucial role in distinguishing "good" women from "bad" ones, thereby emphasizing strict sexual repression. By redefining women as bhadramahila or gentle women, society started setting new limits on their independence through both clothing and moral expectations. While control was the primary mechanism in the old patriarchy, conditions take the centre stage now. The way women dressed and behaved was shaped to fit into the new patriarchal system which ensured that their presence in public life remained controlled. Although the middle-class women, now considered bhadramahila, came out of their secluded spaces, they continued to remain wrapped in strict moral codes. In short, women were not just dressed in new clothes but also in the expectations of modesty, shame, and virtue. There was a constant focus on ensuring that the female body is fully covered and appears pure. Here we should note that while middle-class women refrained from actively showing their sexuality, she was not devoid of beauty. She continued to remain aesthetic in a very passive, controlled manner. The aestheticized clothing remained as promise for a man, who holds the power to "free" her from this imposed cover, an act that is both his privilege and pleasure. As a result, a respectable woman must always be aware of the male gaze and her own potential to provoke it. Bannerji's observation is crucial here. She says. . . “The cover of clothing is presented as the promise of un-covering by an outside male agent. Unveiling her, or "freeing" her from a fabricated encasement, and by extension reforming her, becomes a male prerogative and pleasure. The bhadramahila must be constantly aware of male gaze and her own sexual provocativeness” (187).

Clothing played a crucial role in shaping the identity of the modern gentle woman. In other words, clothes were not just garments, they were the carriers of moral and social meaning. For example, Hemantakumari Choudhury, the editor of the journal Antahpur, considered clothing as a sign of progress, signifying a journey from the primitive to the civilised society. Closely associated with the changes in the sartorial field was the emergence of the notion of *lajja* or shame. This idea of shame of *lajja* left the bodies of upper-class and upper-caste

women totally invisible. It presented the bhadramahila as someone more than just an individual—she became a marker of middle-class gender and social ideals. It created a very interesting paradox in women. First, the notion of *lajja* or shame made bhadramahila be acutely aware of her body and its sexuality, yet a simultaneously made her deny both. This instilled in them a sense of strong guilt and restriction about their sexuality, thereby forcing her to self-censor the visibility of her body. According to Bannerji, writers like Krishnabhabini Das, in her essay *Strilok O Purush*, and contributors to *Bamabodhini* magazine, clearly tied the notion of shame of *lajja* and desexualization and dephysicalization to "civilization." Although there was no consensus of opinion on whether *lajja* was innate or cultivated, it was universally presented as a characteristic of morality and refinement. In the upper-class circles, greater emphasis was placed on mind and intellect, instead of body. Upper-class men were associated with intellect, while linking women and the working class to the physical body. Female sexuality was seen as too "natural," as opposed to cultural and was feared. Naturally it was suppressed, reinforcing male dominance. Shame often functions as a tool to define and reinforce virtue and vice through segregation and self-surveillance. A good example of this perspective is found in the discussions on public bathing. Communal bathing had long been a part of village life and ritual practices. But the writers dismissed this history and presented it as a form of sexual transgression, reinforcing the idea that women's bodies should remain hidden and regulated. Bannerji quotes an anonymous piece in *Bamabodhini Patrika* where public bathing is blatantly criticized. The piece goes as follows. "Education helps to change many disgusting/revolting habits. As people become more civilized, they engage in civilized customs and practices, as befitting of the times. But habit has such an overwhelming power that people continue to nurture many disgusting practices because of it. Women's bathing customs in this country are one of these highly disgusting matters. How it is that civilized and educated people engage to this day in this disgusting/revolting custom I cannot tell! No doubt habit is the cause. But if they are not vigilant about such disgusting/revolting things they will become obstacles for women's improvement. Genteel/civilized, as well as uncivilized women of villages bathe without any reservation together with men. This is not a matter of little disgust! And bathing [here] does not simply mean returning home after a dip. If only that were the case, even that would be no small matter of disgust. But [instead] women, eschewing all shame, stand next to men and clean their body parts in a most revolting manner .... On top of that, the kind of fine [clothing] material they wear is not fit to go out in society, and when that material becomes wet and clings to the body, then there is no difference between being naked and dressed. Many a time a decent man hesitates to get out of the pond in such clothes, but women, displaying remarkable ease, get out of the pond and walk home in their wet clothes."

The new sense of morality which shaped the modern subjectivity of the colonial period was heavily influenced by Victorian Christian ideals, especially those of female gentility. Victorian morality, deeply rooted in ideals of propriety, restraint, and sexual purity, played a crucial role in shaping perceptions of the female body. Women were expected to embody virtue, modesty, and self-sacrifice, and these expectations were reflected in how their bodies were regulated, represented, and controlled. The female body was policed through dress codes, medical discourse, and social norms. Corsets symbolized this control, shaping women's bodies into an exaggerated hourglass figure while also restricting movement and breath. This contrast becomes clear, as we juxtapose the desexualized figure of the bhadramahila with portrayals of upper-class or upper-caste women's sexuality in pre-colonial Bengal. For example, Bharatchandra's *Vidyasundar* presents a heroine, Vidya, who is not merely an object of the male protagonist Sundar's desire, but an active presence in her own right. Bharatchandra Ray's *Vidyasundar* offers us a positive image of female sexuality,

especially through the character of Vidya. As opposed to the conventional portrayal of women in premodern and early modern literary works, where female desire is either suppressed or made subordinate to male longing, Vidyasundar depicts a heroine who actively participates in the process of love and romance on her own terms. The poem presents a new love story wherein both partners are emotionally and physically invested, thereby rejecting the typical one-sided, male-driven longing. We know that in many classical and early modern narratives women are abducted, won in battles, or given away in marriage. But Vidya is allowed to both choose and assert her desires. In other words, the text does not reduce Vidya to a mere body or erotic object of male gaze. She is not a person completely fashioned according to the desires of men. Her sexuality is integrated into her personality, making her a well-rounded character rather than just a symbol of male fantasy.

However, in later literary representations, female sexuality gets increasingly objectified and repressed, as Bengali middle- and upper-class men endorsed an ideology that denied the human body and its desires by tying them with vice. The much-celebrated image of the *bhadramahila* thus presents an image of “femininity” rather than womanhood. By way of doing it, the elite natives not only did suppress women’s sexuality, but also conditioned male sexuality within a framework of moral restraint and denial. The reformist ideology in Bengal regarding women's appearance and behavior is deeply tied to a constant male gaze. This gaze, rooted in gendered class dominance, constructs women as a controlled and sexualized “other.” However, women themselves also participate in this system by embracing the same ideas of “shame” and “civilization.” Their understanding of femininity aligns with men's ideals of gentility and female virtue, yet it is also self-restricting and self-censoring. The opposite of this idealized femininity is the “bad woman,” often symbolized by the figure of the prostitute. Additionally, the concept of “proper clothing,” shaped by and for women from urban, affluent backgrounds, becomes an imposed ideal for all women. Over time, it is accepted as natural, forming a kind of mythology—an intricate set of symbols that reinforce the moral values of the nationalist, upper-class elite.

Having discussed all the major points, let us now wrap up the class. Himani Bannerji’s idea of *lajja* (shame) explores how it was used to shape the identity of middle-class Bengali women during colonial times. In her essay “Textile Prison,” she shows that *lajja* was not just a feeling but a way to control how women behaved and dressed. The ideal woman, known as the *bhadramahila* (respectable woman), had to be modest and follow strict dress codes. Wearing the sari in a certain way became a sign of being respectable. This idea of shame helped the Bengali middle class create its own identity, separate from both the British rulers and the lower classes. At the same time, it also supported patriarchy by keeping women in the private sphere and limiting their freedom. Women were seen as carriers of culture, and their clothes and behavior were expected to reflect the values of their community. Bannerji argues that *lajja* worked like a rule that women followed without being forced, because they had been taught to feel it deeply. In this way, they also helped continue the same rules that controlled them. Bannerji’s work helps us see how gender, class, and colonialism came together to create a special kind of discipline through *lajja*. It shows how a simple idea like shame was used to make women fit into a narrow role and to protect cultural identity under colonial rule.