

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 exploring the different ways in which modernity redefined institutions like marriage, the interior of the domestic sphere and the relationship between husband and wife and children. It goes without saying that the colonial period marked a transformative epoch in the history of many nations across the world. The influences of European colonialism ushered in a profound reconfiguration of societies, cultures, and institutions. As we saw earlier, the notion of modernity was at the heart of this epoch of change, which permeated all facets of life. It fundamentally reshaped not only political and economic structures, but also the very core of everyday existence. One of the most poignant arenas where the impact of modernity became vividly evident was the domestic realm, a sphere where conventional norms, relationships, and living spaces underwent a profound metamorphosis.

The domestic sphere, traditionally seen as a private space, became a site of cultural and ideological conflict. European colonial powers imposed new ideas about marriage, family structure, and gender roles, often viewing local customs as outdated and in need of reform. These new ideas of modernity, with their focus on the nuclear family and clear gender roles, began to replace more flexible family structures found in many indigenous societies.

Colonial authorities promoted European concepts of marriage, like monogamy and a patriarchal family model, as symbols of civilization. These changes often came with a message that indigenous family systems were inferior or primitive. Women, in particular, faced a double-edged sword during this time. On one hand, colonial modernity offered opportunities for education and new roles for women; on the other hand, it reinforced male-dominated family structures, confining women to the domestic sphere. Alongside this, the rise of a middle class in colonial societies also idealized the family as a space for moral values and respectability. The way families were structured, the roles of husbands and wives, and the treatment of children were all shaped by these new ideas of modern life. At the same time, postcolonial families had to balance traditional practices with the pressures of adapting to a new, modern world. This period marks a time when the domestic sphere, once a space of relative freedom, became a battleground for cultural and social change.

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One such important social institution which underwent a total transformation during this period was the institution of marriage. During the late colonial period, marriage practices in India underwent significant changes and reforms. These shifts led to the emergence of a new type of marriage that was arranged in a specific fashion. If you want to know more about the way the colonial modernity redefined the notion of marriage, you can take a look at “Marriage And Modernity: Family Values In Colonial Bengal” by Rochona Majumdar. According to Majumdar, the popular conception was that during the colonial period, the previous system of arranged marriages got replaced by a new system of marriage based completely on mutual compatibility and love. But contrary to this popular notion that modernity led to the decline of arranged marriage and the development of love marriages,

completely based on the mutual compatibility of men and women, the arranged marriages continued to persist even in the colonial society. But this was a form of arranged marriage that was in a transformed form, adapting to the changing social and economic landscape. This new version of arranged marriage selectively incorporated the language of choice, romance, and emotional compatibility, often blurring the lines between love and arrangement. Families played a key role in mediating these matches, but now with an eye on education, class, and shared values rather than merely caste or kinship. In this way, modernity did not erase arranged marriage but reshaped it to align with emerging ideals of individualism and companionate relationships.

Under British rule, Bengal saw major economic transformations, particularly in terms of employment and wealth distribution. Particularly important was the emergence of a new class of professionals, bureaucrats, and urban merchants. Instead of taking into account solely the caste or lineage-based considerations, economic security became a major concern in fixing the marriage in the middle class circles. One of the striking features of economic change was the commodification of marriage. Majumdar examines the increasing use of marriage advertisements in newspapers, a practice that had been rare in earlier times. These advertisements reflected the economic motivations behind marriage. Families explicitly highlighted salaries, educational qualifications, and employment stability in matrimonial ads, showing a shift towards financial considerations in matchmaking. Marriage advertisements appeared in newspapers and periodicals in large numbers and on a regular basis from the early years of the twentieth century. Even though there were instances of a few stray advertisements soliciting brides and grooms before this period, the task of negotiating marriages belonged to the traditional matchmaker. The families also made it a point to frame arranged marriage as an institution of cultural and moral value, masking its increasing commercialization. It should be noted that the popularity of arranged marriage did not essentially reject the modern values of conjugal life as such as. While arranged marriages continued, new discourses on love, emotional fulfilment, and compatibility emerged within the Bengali middle class. The influence of Western education and literature introduced the idea that marriage should involve emotional connection alongside familial duty. However, rather than leading to a rejection of arranged marriage, these ideas were incorporated into its evolving structure.

For the Bengali bhadralok, arranged marriage became a key marker of respectability and social status. The choice of marriage alliances was influenced by concerns over caste purity, economic stability, and the projection of a refined, modern identity. Even as notions of love and personal choice entered public discourse, marriage continued to function as a tool for preserving family honor and class distinctions. Majumdar also challenges the common perception that arranged marriage was a static, traditional institution disrupted by colonial modernity. Instead, she argues that colonial rule played an active role in reshaping marriage customs in Bengal, leading to transformations in economic transactions, legal structures, and social expectations surrounding marriage. She highlights how marriage in colonial Bengal was not just about kinship and caste purity but was also deeply entangled with class mobility, economic security, and colonial legal interventions.

One of the significant ways in which British rule reshaped marriage was through the codification of Hindu and Muslim personal laws. Before colonial rule, marriage laws were largely governed by customary practices and community-based arbitration. However, as the British sought to systematize legal governance, they codified religious personal laws, making marriage a matter of state oversight. The Age of Consent Act of 1891 was one of the most controversial legal interventions by the colonial state. Majumdar discusses how the act, which

raised the age of consent for girls from ten to twelve years, was framed by the British as a humanitarian reform. However, it provoked widespread resistance from conservative Hindu groups, who viewed it as colonial interference in religious customs. The same was the case with the widow marriage act which allowed Hindu widows to get married.

The conjugal relationship, traditionally embedded in cultural and familial structures, underwent a substantial transformation. The dynamics of marriage, family, and gender roles were altered as colonialism introduced new ideologies and social norms. The patriarchal structures that defined many societies began to adapt, albeit unevenly, to more egalitarian concepts imported from the West. Women, in particular, experienced changing roles and newfound agency as they navigated the evolving terrain of modernity.

The physical structure of the domestic space itself also underwent a radical reconfiguration. Homes were no longer just spaces of shelter and family life but became symbols of socio-cultural transformation. The architecture of homes, their layout, and the organization of private and public spaces were all influenced by modern ideas of comfort, functionality, and aesthetics. The Western concept of the private sphere, distinct from the public, found its way into domestic design, and the home began to reflect new ways of living and interacting. Marital relationships in India traditionally developed within joint families. Literature and biographies show that specific rules shaped how couples behaved in such settings. Young couples often felt shy or awkward when together in front of other family members. Both men and women followed certain customs to show that they were not overly focused on each other, especially in a romantic way. Women, in particular, were expected to avoid showing too much attention to their husbands. This idea also extended to caring for children—mothers were expected to treat all children in the joint family as their own, not just their biological children. A good mother was one who showed equal love and care to all the children in the household.

The significant shift from the ancestral seat of the joint family brought about profound sociological changes. In this new context, there were fewer relatives, especially elders, present to enforce the traditional code of conjugal shame. The absence of constant influence and consultation from close kin meant that the husband's primary source of support and guidance became his wife. This shift led to a tendency toward greater equality in their relationship, not necessarily in terms of power, but because both partners faced shared experiences and had to navigate challenges, opportunities, and decisions together. Highly unequal relationships became less practical for men, particularly when wives lacked the education to engage in their husbands' interests. Consequently, husbands found it in their best interest to provide education to their wives and make them cultural equals. As couples shared their lives and experiences in a context of mutual dependence, forming unique memories that were distinct from those in their joint family, their bond strengthened. It created a new form of intimacy between married individuals living a modern life. This intimacy was influenced by the practical circumstances of sharing occupational experiences and the ideological influence of rationalistic principles of autonomy, often aided by the moral inspiration of romantic novels. While many marriages may not have started as romantic unions, they often evolved into such relationships in retrospect. Traditionally, such displays of sexuality and personal indulgence were considered vulgar.

The material conditions also helped the new middle class start a new life, founded on the principles of modernity. When the young men from the middle class got into government employment, it brought significant changes to their personal lives, particularly in terms of intimacy and social relationships. These jobs typically offered high salaries and associated

benefits. These employees relocated from their ancestral homes to spacious government accommodations. They had to permanently reside away from their close-knit circles of relatives in villages or towns, thereby leading to a departure from the traditional way of life surrounded by siblings, cousins, and in-laws. With their increasing income and changing mindset, many of them were able to bring their wives to live with them, resulting in a fundamentally different conjugal lifestyle compared to the village-centric environment of the previous generation. This arrangement often left a relatively young, financially comfortable couple in the unusual situation of being in each other's company without any obstructions. They resided in spacious and stylish homes, which they decorated to reflect their personal tastes, creating an intimate living space marked as "theirs" and distinct from others. This private character of their living space was defined by objects representing their individuality, conjugal photographs, and even double beds. These private spaces served as a platform for displaying taste and a material culture that valued sophisticated and delicate possessions. Material objects in this context went beyond their functional purposes in rural households and played a different role in signalling affluence and cultural refinement.

Here we should note that in many cases, the relationship between men and women did not really start off as a romantic relationship. It was later made into romantic relationships based on the ideas that they drew from the romantic novels and literary representations of the period. Women in that era seldom enjoyed independence or the freedom to choose their life partners when they married. Pre-marital courtship was often hindered by prevailing circumstances. However, post-marriage, as wives reached maturity, progressive men often made earnest efforts to infuse a somewhat romantic dimension into these externally dictated unions. This aspect is notably present in the film "Water," directed by Deepa Mehta. In the movie, the protagonist Narayan initially selects a girl who possesses the physical attributes he deems suitable for a wife. However, he discovers that she lacks the mental qualities he believes an ideal wife should possess. Narayan takes it upon himself to introduce her to the realms of literature and the material world, with the aim of transforming her into the ideal "bhadramahila" he seeks. A similar transformation can be observed in the character of Bimala from Rabindranath Tagore's novel "The Home and the World." Bimala is the wife of Nikhil, described as conventionally attractive and hailing from a more modest background than her husband. Initially, she appears confined to traditional female roles with no aspirations of venturing into the wider world. However, Nikhil takes on the role of an educator, guiding her in her journey to become an ideal "bhadramahila" of that era. While women did not experience complete equality within these relationships, they did manage to gain a significant degree of autonomy in their actions and garnered respect. If you want to know more about these aspects, I recommend that you should read Sudipta Kaviraj's famous text "The Invention of Private Life."

Here we should not think that the idea of a modern man often replaced the traditional notions. The modern individuals who asserted their individuality over the claims of the joint or extended family often appeared as a tragic figure in many literary representations. It is best exemplified by the fictional character Nimchand Datta in Dinabandhu Mitra's play "Sadhabar ekadashi" (1866). Nimchand, an English-educated individual, who frequently quoted Shakespeare, Milton, or Locke is portrayed as arrogantly neglecting his responsibilities toward his extended family. He does not succeed in his life. In the play, his downfall was associated with alcohol and debauchery. The connection between the pursuit of "modern" or English education (symbolizing the romantic individual in nineteenth-century Bengal) and the perilous path of alcohol was illustrated in a conversation between Nimchand and a Deputy Magistrate who is a Bengali official of the colonial bureaucracy. Nimchand's

pretentious pride in his English language proficiency invariably led to discussions about alcoholic drinks, which, in middle-class Bengali culture at the time, were synonymous with utter decadence. Nimchand says “I read English, write English, speechify in English, think in English, dream in English- mind you, it's no child's play-now tell me, my good fellow, what would you like to drink?- Claret for ladies, sherry for men and brandy for heroes.” This shows that in traditional circles modernity was intrinsically connected with downfall, arrogance, debauchery and alcoholism. Although this feeling was strong in many traditional circles, nothing could ultimately check the ride of modernity in the new elite generation of the period.

In conclusion, the colonial period represents a historical epoch of remarkable transformation, with the driving force of modernity at its heart. This lecture has aimed to illuminate the far-reaching effects of modernity on the domestic realm, elucidating the evolution of conjugal relationships and the architectural configuration of homes. Through a meticulous examination of the insightful articles by Kaviraj and Chakrabarty, our endeavor has been to foster a deeper comprehension of the intricacies surrounding this transformative period and the enduring consequences it holds for societies emerging from the legacy of colonialism. The colonial period transformed marriage and domestic life in Bengal, blending tradition with modern ideals. While arranged marriages persisted, they now emphasized compatibility, education, and class—reflected in the rise of matrimonial ads highlighting salaries and jobs. British laws like the Age of Consent Act sparked backlash but slowly changed attitudes. Urban middle-class couples, living in nuclear homes with double beds and private spaces, developed new intimacy—though women often had to be "educated" into ideal wives by their husbands, as seen in Tagore's *The Home and the World*. Yet modernity had its critics: traditionalists mocked English-educated men like the tragic, whiskey-drinking Nimchand in *Sadhavar Ekdashi*, seeing modernity as moral decay. Still, the allure of modern comforts—government jobs, stylish homes, and romantic ideals—proved unstoppable, reshaping Bengali society in ways both progressive and paradoxical. I hope you have understood these points well. Thank you!