

THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN IN BRITISH INDIA AND ITS POSTCOLONIAL LEGACY

DR SUMAN LAL

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT UNIVERSITY OF DELHI, INDIA, Sumankumari4290@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The article examines the impact of British colonial rule on Indian society, with particular emphasis on Indian women. British colonialism significantly influenced the physical, intellectual and psychological, and historical representations of women in India. Through policies such as the introduction of a western-style education system, the British portrayed Indian society as backward and inferior to the West, thereby reshaping indigenous social and cultural understandings.

Colonial rule in India had a unique and far-reaching impact, redefining both the country's past and its future. Over more than a century, British governance transformed India's social, economic, political and cultural structures. The colonial period also witnessed the emergence of new debates on women's roles and identities, linking issues of gender with caste, social reform, communalism, and nationalism. Through official records, print culture, oral histories, memoirs, art and theatre, colonial and national discourses constructed and reconstructed the image of Indian women, especially upper-caste Hindu women, generating significant social and political debates.

KEYWORDS: Colonialism, Nationalism, Social Reform, Society, Women

INTRODUCTION

Imperial rule has been a significantly influential phenomenon for the entire world. It played a crucial role in shaping the future trajectory of global societies. Colonialism is considered important not only because of its direct consequences but also because it is often argued that, had the world not come under the control of imperial powers, the current global socio-economic and political landscape would have been markedly different. Most of the countries currently categorised as developing or underdeveloped were once under some form of colonial domination, which led to extensive economic exploitation. In other words, the rapid development of the present-day developed nations was, to a large extent, built upon the economic extraction from these colonised regions. Colonialism also contributed to the formation of the "Third World" and the emergence of nationalist ideologies (Puri, 2004).

In the Indian context, colonial rule—particularly British rule—had a distinct impact compared to other countries. It not only played a significant role in shaping India's future but also redefined the understanding of its past. Over the course of a century, British colonial rulers deeply influenced the social, economic, political, and cultural structures of Indian society. Furthermore, during colonial rule, interrelations between categories such as gender, caste, social reform, communalism, and nationalism were developed and articulated.

The colonial impact becomes particularly important in India's case because a wide range of mediums—official records, oral histories, print culture, personal memoirs, myths, material realities, rhetorical representations, art, theatre, and more—played a crucial role in constructing and reconstructing the identity of colonial India, especially that of Indian women (predominantly upper-caste Hindu women). These representations gave rise to new debates surrounding women's roles and identities (Gupta, 2012). Partha Chatterjee referred to this as the "colonization of the mind." According to Chatterjee, the colonial system had not only dominated Indian society politically and economically, but also colonised the thought processes and imaginations of its people. The 'formal education' introduced by British rulers, ostensibly to 'civilise' the 'uncultured' Indians, was in fact a form of constructed knowledge aimed at sustaining British hegemony in India. Through this system of education, the British managed to exert long-term control over India. Chatterjee asserts that this constructed knowledge gave rise to an Indian elite class (Chatterjee, 1993), which later played a major role in the country's struggle for independence, in shaping nationalist ideologies, and in advocating for women's education, social reform, and the emergence of the "new woman."

The impact of British colonialism in India is generally analysed from two contrasting perspectives. The first perspective critiques British interventions in Indian society, economy, and its traditional social structures. The second, however, acknowledges some positive outcomes of such interventions—such as the loosening of rigid caste hierarchies, the upliftment of marginalised castes, and improvements in women's status. Both perspectives hold relevance in the Indian context. On one hand, colonial rulers exploited India's economic resources and attempted to impose foreign institutional frameworks on its indigenous systems. On the other hand, foreign intervention played a constructive role by disrupting centuries-old caste structures based on notions of purity and pollution, thereby creating opportunities for socio-economic mobility among previously marginalised groups.

Among the most profoundly affected groups under colonial rule—yet discussed much later— were women. The impact of colonialism on women was distinctive: it granted them limited freedoms while simultaneously subjecting them to new kinds of constraints. These constraints were rooted in cultural nationalism, modernity, and the emerging elite culture of the Indian middle class.

Prior to colonial rule, women were largely considered as integral parts of tradition, bound within familial and cultural roles. However, during the colonial era, in an effort to resist British interference, these same traditions began to be portrayed as the foundational essence of Indian identity. In addition, British colonialism became a milestone in the redefinition of gender relations and the status of women in Indian society. The colonial period, in terms of women, was a paradoxical era of both progress and regression. On one hand, colonial rule introduced legislative reforms such as the Sati Abolition Act and the Child Marriage Restraint Act (commonly known as the Sharda Act) (Channa, 2013, p. 145), which aimed at improving the social status of women. On the other hand, it simultaneously gave rise to new narratives surrounding women—narratives that not only deviated from but often contradicted earlier conceptions. These new constructs served to suppress women through the imposition of tradition in newer, subtler ways. Surprisingly, many modern, educated, and elite women of the time actively endorsed these traditions, becoming agents in reinforcing the very structures that limited them.

To better understand the impact and consequences of colonial rule on women in India, the subject can be analysed in three distinct phases:

1. The construction of new knowledge about Indian civilisation and women's history to prove Indian superiority over western civilisation
2. The Suppression of Early Movements for Women's Empowerment Under the Veil of Cultural Nationalism, and the Use of Women as Symbols in Nation-Building
3. The Re-imagination and Control of Women through Calendar Art, Popular Culture, Films, Theatre, and Print Media, Leading to the Construction of an Idealised Yet Detached Image of Womanhood

1.1 Construction of New Knowledge: Portraying Indian Civilisation as Superior to the West

Scholar Uma Chakravarti has conducted a detailed and incisive analysis of the construction of historical knowledge during the colonial period, particularly with regard to Indian women. In her essay, she explores how the ideal of womanhood was constructed, and how these ideals were intimately linked to later mechanisms of social control and oppression.

In her essay *"Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism, and a Script for the Past,"* Chakravarti demonstrates how Orientalist scholars, during the colonial period, created historically misleading representations of women. These narratives did not merely serve the interests of the colonial state; they also laid the groundwork for a future framework of Indian womanhood. Through these colonial reconstructions, the qualities of *"ideal femininity"* were articulated, which over time evolved into the attributes of the so-called *"ideal Hindu woman."* These ideas, though framed as celebratory of India's glorious past, contributed to shaping a narrow and prescriptive vision of womanhood. In the name of cultural revival and nationalism, women were assigned specific traits and roles that often functioned to restrict their agency rather than liberate them.

Uma Chakravarti argues that Orientalists were actively engaged in reconstructing Indian history and civilisation during the colonial period—an intellectual endeavour that later laid the foundation for the emergence of cultural nationalism during the Indian freedom struggle. In the Indian context, two streams of Orientalist thought can be identified. On one hand, Orientalists such as Max Müller, William Jones, and H.T. Colebrooke, celebrated Indian civilisation, culture, and traditions. In support of their claims, they highlighted the elevated status of women in ancient India by referencing learned female figures such as Gargi and Maitreyee. However, it is striking that these scholars systematically ignored the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and patriarchal oppression that existed in contemporary Indian society. They neglected to address issues such as the Sati practice, child marriage, and the marginalisation of widows. For example, Orientalist Charlotte Speir, despite encountering conflicting textual evidence regarding women's declining freedom and education in ancient texts, chose to emphasise romanticised depictions of female figures like Nala- Damayanti, Savitri, and Satyavan. Another Orientalist, Clarisse Bader, astonishingly described the Sati practice as "awe-inspiring," viewing it as a manifestation of a woman's extraordinary capabilities. It becomes difficult to deny that these Orientalists, who expressed admiration for India's culture and the supposed status of its women, were operating from a patriarchal worldview, one that mirrored their vision of ideal womanhood in their own societies.

On the other hand, there were figures like James Mill and members of the Church Missionary Society, who severely criticised Indian society based on the poor condition of its women. According to Mill, women in India had always been oppressed, and this became a central justification for British rule. British administrators labeled Indian civilisation as barbaric and uncivilised. They legitimised colonial rule on three main grounds

1. *The Aryan Theory of Max Müller, which argued that Indians were of Aryan descent and therefore under the protective obligation of the British.*
2. *The belief that Indians were inherently barbaric and failed to treat their women with dignity, justifying British intervention in the name of protecting Hindu women.*
3. *A racialized view that Indians were effeminate and inherently lacked the masculine capacity for self-rule, making them unfit for independence (Chakravarti, 2012).*

American journalist Katherine Mayo echoed such sentiments in her controversial book “*Mother India (1927)*”, where she criticised harmful Indian customs such as child marriage and Sati, branding Hindu culture as regressive. According to Mayo, Indians were too backward to deserve political independence, and she used this rationale to oppose the Indian freedom movement (Sinha, 2006).

It becomes clear that while many Western thinkers dismissed Indian claims to self-rule based on the degraded status of women, Indian men, in contrast, elevated women into the spiritual domain to defend Indian tradition and resist colonial intervention. Soon, Indian intellectuals educated in Western philosophy began critiquing colonial knowledge, marking the beginning of cultural nationalism in India. Women became the first ideological site through which British claims to civilise India were contested. In response to colonial accusations, the image of the “*modern Indian woman*” was constructed, giving rise to two parallel developments. First, the emergence of social reforms aimed at improving the condition of women; and second, the subjugation of women under male control in the name of their protection. (Sinha, 2007, p. 218)

1.2 Colonialism, the Rise of Cultural Nationalism, and the use of Women in Nation- Building

The concept of nationalism, often considered a European contribution, entered the colonies during the colonial period and played a vital role in their struggle for liberation. In a country like India—divided by caste, language, religion, and region—nationalism became the binding force that united people in their fight against foreign rule. In his seminal essay “Who’s Imagined Community?”, Partha Chatterjee contends that in order to preserve their sovereignty under colonialism, anti-imperialist nationalists divided Indian society into two spheres: the material and the spiritual. The material sphere—comprising science, technology, and economic development—was where Western nations had undeniable superiority. Therefore, nationalists reluctantly accepted Western dominance in this domain (Chatterjee, 2005, pp. 238, 240).

Britain had already demonstrated its modernity and power globally through education, science, technology, art, and theatre (Viswanathan, 2010). Consequently, Indian nationalists sought to assert Indian greatness in the spiritual domain, which was the only space left untouched by British colonial power and interference.

To protect this spiritual domain, cultural nationalists were the first to oppose colonial interventions in women’s issues. They resisted reforms such as the Sharda Act and the 1829 abolition of Sati (Ranjan, 1993), viewing them as encroachments on Indian sovereignty. While early social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar called for colonial intervention to improve women’s conditions, cultural nationalists opposed any British influence in matters of national culture. They argued that modern education was corrupting Indian women.

This conflict between reformists and traditionalists gave rise to the tradition versus modernity debate. According to Chatterjee, it was precisely through this “inner domain”—the private, spiritual realm—that Indians were able to defend their traditions against European critiques that labeled Indian society as backward and barbaric (Chatterjee, 2005, pp. 240, 243). This moment marked the first phase of the emergence of cultural nationalism, particularly within the framework of a Hindu national identity.

According to Uma Chakravarti (2012), three primary factors were responsible for the rise of cultural nationalism in India:

1. *The utilitarian critique of Hindu civilisation, particularly by James Mill.*
2. *The perceived threat posed by Christian missionaries, who were actively attempting religious conversions, especially in Calcutta.*
3. *The abolition of the practice of sati, which many orthodox Hindus viewed as an unwarranted interference by the British government in Hindu society.*

In response to colonial accusations against Indian society, writings on the historical status of women began as early as the 1840s. Between 1840 and 1841, Gobind Chandra Sen attempted to refute James Mill’s criticisms and sought to revive the image of Hindu civilisation by glorifying the valour of the Rajput community and portraying Muslim society as barbaric. Alongside this effort, historical writings began to emphasise the status of women in Hindu society in an attempt to portray Hindu civilisation as superior to both Western and Islamic cultures.

Perry Chand Mitra declared that women in ancient Hindu society enjoyed greater freedom than those in any other society. R.C. Dutt, in his work *History of Civilization in Ancient India*, sought to respond to all colonial questions regarding the status of women during the colonial period. He refuted James Mill’s accusations and portrayed women in the Vedic period as prosperous, educated, and respected. Dutt asserted that women during the Vedic era were independent and learned, living without any form of social constraints. To substantiate his claims, he cited the examples of Gargi and Maitreyee. Dutt also reconstructed the image of Kshatriya Hindu women in medieval India. In his novel *Pratap Singh*, he highlighted the virtues of Kshatriya women who, in the face of Mughal aggression, chose ‘*Jauhar*’ (self-immolation) over dishonour, thereby protecting their ‘*honour*’. In other words, practices such as sati and Jauhar were glorified as acts of feminine virtue and chastity. The harsh historical conditions that compelled Rajput women to commit Jauhar were reframed as honourable choices, thus romanticising and legitimising these practices as culturally valorous.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay also played a significant role in constructing the cultural identities of men and women. Bankim argued that Indians had forgotten their conception of the “nation.” For Bankim, the term “nation” specifically referred to a “Hindu nation,” which he sought to revive through his celebrated work *Anandamath*. Influenced by Max Müller’s theory of Aryan purity, Bankim associated this ideal with the upper castes,

particularly the Bengali Brahmins. His construction of national identity excluded not only the Muslim community but also the lower castes.

Bankim envisioned a model of womanhood aligned with the ideal of a *sahadharmini*—a companion who would share her husband's duties and contribute collectively to the cause of national liberation. For him, the ideal Hindu woman was religious, self-sacrificing, idealistic, tolerant, and in control of her own sexuality. Like Bankim, Swami Dayanand Saraswati also sought to regulate female sexuality in order to preserve Aryan racial purity. Since future generations would be born from the womb of the woman, it was deemed necessary that women remain healthy and pure. To ensure this, Dayanand proposed several measures, such as the segregation of boys and girls from an early age and gender-specific education. For women, education was naturally envisioned in a form that would help shape them into ideal mothers and wives. Regarding women's freedom, Dayanand, like others, maintained that in the Vedic period women were independent and not subject to any form of control. However, following the advent of the Mughals, Hindu society, in its effort to protect the chastity *satitva* (chastity) of women, was compelled to confine them to the domestic sphere (Chakravarti, 2012, pp. 36–56).

It is evident here that all these thinkers idealised the status of women during the Vedic period and held Muslim rulers responsible for the subsequent decline in women's position. According to Chakravarti, during the 18th and 19th centuries, due to the glorification and propagation of Hindu culture and traditions by cultural nationalists, upper-caste Hindu women internalized the notion of a “*Golden Age*” in relation to their own history. Educated and “civilized” women from upper sections of society also came to believe that Hindu traditions had granted them a supreme status, unmatched by any other religion. They attributed the decline in their social position primarily to Muslim rule.

In the effort to revive this “Golden Age” for women and respond to colonial critiques, the construction of the “modern woman” was significantly shaped by art, theatre, cinema, and print media.

1.3 The Construction of a New Identity for Women through Art, Theatre, Films, and Print Media beyond the Realistic Scenario.

During colonial rule in British India, the dissemination of modern education and nationalist ideas led to the production and reproduction of knowledge that significantly reshaped the image of Hindu women in Indian society. In addition to these ideological processes, modern mediums such as print media, theatre, calendar art, and cinema played a vital role in reconstructing an idealized, traditional image of Hindu womanhood. The elite class also played a crucial part in this project of cultural reproduction.

1.3.1 Print Media and Women's Society

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, print media played a critical role in social reform movements, the construction of nationalism, and the modern portrayal of women. Print media emerged as the primary vehicle through which colonial rulers succeeded in producing knowledge in India. Many social reformers utilized this platform to critique traditions and cultural practices that were oppressive to women. Print media was also instrumental in mobilizing public opinion against foreign imperialism and in constructing a sense of cultural nationalism.

Through newspapers, books, and magazines, print media propagated the ideal image of women necessary for nation-building. Importantly, the colonial era's approach to women's education was not aimed at liberating them from traditional constraints but rather at shaping them into ideal wives for the *bhadralok* (refined men). As most upper-class men were educated and held prestigious positions such as lawyers, doctors, and government officials, they desired wives who would enhance their social stature. These wives were fluent in English in public but lived their lives largely confined within the domestic sphere (*andar-mahal*).

As a result, the number of women who became educated after marriage—especially those who had remained uneducated beforehand—rose significantly during this period. Social reformer Jyotirao Phule also criticized the patriarchal attitudes of the upper classes toward women.

Undoubtedly, modern education opened up new avenues for many women—including Pandita Ramabai, Sarala Devi, Savitribai Phule, Anandi Gopal Joshi, and Mahadevi Verma—who went on to become the country's first female doctors, writers, poets, and educators. Yet, the primary goal of this education system remained the production of ideal wives, and print media played a central role in perpetuating this agenda.

In her essay “*Marginalisation of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal*,” Sumanta Banerjee explores the relationship between the decline of popular culture, the emergence of the *bhadralok* class, and the suppression of women. She argues that the rise of the *bhadralok* in Bengal, under the influence of Christian missionaries, administrators, and educationists, brought with it new social norms and gender expectations that were quite distinct from those prevailing in the broader society at the time.

By the late 19th century, Bengal witnessed the rise of a new category of civilized women shaped by modern education—women who were distinct from those belonging to popular or working-class cultures. These women were part of the emerging middle-class society or *bhadralok*, which advocated for women's education, empowerment, and freedom in principle. However, in practice, this class imposed a new form of control over its women by establishing separate cultural values that distinguished them from women of lower social strata—primarily the poor and marginalized. This was a strategic assertion of social and cultural superiority under the guise of modernity.

During the 19th century, women from affluent and middle-class backgrounds were largely confined to the *andar-mahal* (inner quarters) to protect them from the perceived moral corruption of the outside world. There were strict prohibitions on women stepping out of the home, based on the belief that a respectable woman from a civilized society should not be visible in public spaces. These women were not even permitted the freedom to visit markets. Domestic servants were employed to procure household necessities, while items such as clothing and jewelry required for women's adornment were delivered directly to the home. Furthermore, upper-class women were forbidden from interacting with lower-class women, particularly Muslim women.

In contrast, women from poorer strata—including cleaners, vegetable and fish vendors, and domestic workers—enjoyed comparatively greater freedom than upper-class women. The visibility and participation of lower-class women in public life generated a sense of insecurity among upper-class women. During this period, several magazines that appeared to support women's education and empowerment also introduced new patriarchal norms specifically targeting middle-class women. One such publication was *Bamabodhini Patrika*, which advocated for women's development, yet simultaneously reinforced the belief that respectable women should not be present in public spaces.

Hamagini Chaudhuri, writing in *Antapur*, echoes these patriarchal values, she mentioned in her article that “*Even if the husband uses abusive language in anger, it is the wife's duty to silently endure it. Disobeying the husband is considered improper.*” The *bhadralok* (respectable) male elite sought to shield their women from the influence of popular culture. According to them, the social behaviors and values of the lower classes—where women moved freely in public—posed a threat to the moral purity of their own women. Thus, they advocated for a culture and set of values that would spiritually purify women and train them in domestic responsibilities. In other words, women within the *bhadralok* class were being educated to conform to an idealized and traditional model of femininity.

Even educated women from this elite group supported this form of education, which emphasized training women to become ideal housewives. These women were not granted the freedom to work outside the home. In fact, upper-class women themselves hesitated to go out in public like lower-class women. In this context, men from the upper castes not only opposed the public presence of lower-class women but also labeled them as immoral.

Swami Dayanand Saraswati supported educating women in a specific way to preserve Aryan racial purity. Similarly, other nationalist thinkers promoted an education that encouraged women to regulate their own sexuality, again to safeguard the supposed purity of the Aryan race. While modern education allowed elite women (*bhadramahila*) access to literature and a platform to express themselves, it also functioned as a tool to reinforce new forms of patriarchy. All cultural traditions that portrayed women as socially and physically active were increasingly excluded from the definition of a “civilized” society (Banerjee, 1989, pp. 128–168; Channa, 2013, pp. 68–100).

Thus, the traditional and idealized image of women in Indian society was constructed not only through historical writing and rewriting, but also through translation into other languages, cultural influences, personal perspectives, rhetorical modifications, and the deliberate selection of words. Romila Thapar (2010) conducted an in-depth study of the construction of the “ideal Indian woman,” especially during colonial India, through the example of Shakuntala—one of the prominent female characters in the *Mahabharata*. Thapar argues that the Shakuntala celebrated today as the model Hindu woman bears little resemblance to the Shakuntala portrayed in the ancient epic.

In the *Mahabharata*, Shakuntala is depicted as bold, courageous, self-respecting, and unafraid to fight for her rights. She did not shy away from questioning or challenging authority to establish the truth. However, in *Abhijnana-sakuntalam*, Kalidasa dramatically altered her character to make the love story between Shakuntala and Dushyanta more appealing. Kalidasa's version presents Shakuntala as emotional and fragile. As the story was translated from Sanskrit into Latin, German, and other European languages, additional myths and sensual descriptions of her physical beauty were introduced—details that were not found in the *Mahabharata*.

In an effort to counter James Mill's severe critique of Indian history, the English translation and publication of Kalidasa's play in 1855 by Monier-Williams under the title *Shakuntala or The Lost Ring* presented Shakuntala as a symbol of Indian spirituality. She subsequently emerged as an ideal figure for the educated, upper-caste Hindu woman during the British colonial period (p. 219).

1.3.2 Representation of Women in Art

The colonial rulers not only exploited India's political and economic resources but also influenced its culture, traditions, and art. The changes introduced by the British in Indian art during the colonial period aligned it more closely with Western artistic styles. In Western societies, women were commonly portrayed through glamorous and sexualized imagery, whereas in South Asian societies, the image of women was quite the opposite—rooted in tradition and presented as non-sexual. This dichotomy was also reflected in art during the nationalist movement in India. As nationalist thinkers used the figure of the woman to build a sense of national identity, artists similarly reconstructed the female body on canvas to showcase Indian artistic traditions as superior to European art.

Although women's status in European societies was arguably better than in South Asian contexts—with access to rights like education and employment—Western societies were still patriarchal. Thus, even in European paintings, the glamorous and sexualized representation of women often deviated from reality. From the 15th century to the mid-19th century, what was labeled as “Modern European Art” included a tradition of “nude” paintings of women, reflecting a materialistic perspective towards the female body. This genre of art contributed

to the emergence of the "male gaze" and objectified women's bodies for male pleasure. When debates on modernity versus tradition began in colonial India, these Eurocentric perspectives left a lasting imprint on modern Indian art. Indian artists, in response, began portraying Hindu upper-class women, using their bodies as cultural symbols to counter the West.

Despite being more "modern," Western societies maintained male control over female sexuality. The widespread representation of women as sexual beings in art did not reflect their actual social status. Women were neither free to express their sexuality nor permitted to speak openly about it. Erotic art in the West emerged primarily to fulfill male desires. Although the subjects of nude paintings were women, the painters were male, and the intended viewers were also predominantly male (Clark, 2008, pp. 4–17). This male-centric approach illustrates the patriarchal mindset of Western societies. Even in modern Western contexts, women imagining their own nudity was considered sinful. Through nude art and sculpture, new dimensions were constructed around women's bodies. In India, modern painters responded to colonial criticism and sought to elevate their spiritual heritage. They reimagined the female figure not only under the influence of Western styles but also as an idealized counterpart. When European criticism of Indian art intensified in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906) emerged as one of the first Indian painters trained in Western art, who was also educated in Hindu mythology and Sanskrit. In response to foreign rulers and critics, and to contribute to the development of Indian nationalism, Varma painted upper-class Indian women who appeared sensuous like Western women, but whose inner essence was idealistic and rooted in Indian values. His art significantly contributed to the construction of cultural nationalism across India. Influenced by contemporary debates on culture in colonial India, Varma used the female figure to represent the emerging modern Hindu nation. However, the modern woman he portrayed on canvas was largely a fictional construct. During that time in Bengal, women, including girls as young as five, would cover themselves from head to toe. Sarees were the common attire in pre-independence India, yet Varma's depiction of upper-class women did not reflect the real or accepted image of women at the time. However, it did create a lasting, subconscious image of the "ideal" woman that continues to influence perceptions today.

Around the same time, Abanindranath Tagore also responded to European criticism through a distinctly different artistic approach. In opposition to the 1905 partition of Bengal and in an effort to foster national unity, Tagore created the painting *Bharat Mata*, in which the nation was personified as a woman. This portrayal of Bharat Mata as a young, modest, dis-sexualized woman dressed in saffron with four hands represented sacrifice and courage—an ideal for all women. The female body was symbolically mapped onto the geography of India. In another painting, *The Passing of Shah Jahan*, Tagore depicted the last days of the Mughal emperor. In this piece, his daughter sits on the ground with the Taj Mahal in the background, symbolizing India's glorious past. Shah Jahan's impending death represents the end of India's "glorious era," while the Mughal princess embodies the grieving nation.

This clearly shows that during the colonial period, the upper-class Hindu woman emerged as a symbolic agent through whom debates on nationalism, culture, and history were conducted. The female body became a site for contesting modern ideas. Raja Ravi Varma's depiction of women was physically modern, bold, and sensuous, akin to Western representations, but their inner character remained deeply Indian. Yet, even in this symbolic role, the female body remained under male control. Amrita Sher-Gil later responded to these dominant images of women through her own artistic expressions. However, even her work continued to use the female figure as the central subject.

Thus, it is evident that both Western and Eastern male artists constructed idealized notions of the "perfect female body" and "beauty" through their paintings and sculptures, which have since become embedded as social values for women in modern societies (Verma, 2018; Vishwanathan, 2010).

1.3.3 Representation of Women in Theatre

In the construction of cultural nationalism in India and the creation of the ideal image of upper-class women, film and theatre—alongside print media and visual art—played a significant role. India has a long-standing tradition of conveying ideas to the masses through collective theatrical performances. Many folk narratives were passed down from generation to generation via dramatic enactments. The rise of modern theatre in colonial India is largely attributed to the middle class, who desired creative expression and the performance of plays in their native languages.

During British rule, theatre became a platform through which the elite class expressed opposition to colonial rule. It was also the only medium through which the imagined figure of Bharat Mata, as conceptualized by Abanindranath Tagore, could be vividly brought to life. Theatre offered a sensory and emotional experience—audiences could see, hear, and feel their nation personified, and witness the injustices of colonial rule. There is no doubt that theatre also played a role in constructing the Indian woman. Particularly for the middle-class woman, theatre became a platform through which she could be ideologically educated within a patriarchal framework.

In this context, scholar Gail Minault notes that the nation was imagined as an "extended family" and the responsibility of maintaining this familial structure was placed on women. This idea was disseminated widely through theatre across the country. In most plays, women were portrayed as the 'ideal' mother and wife. Many scripts were written and staged with a focus on female 'purity'—a concept largely defined by upper-class men. This female purity was then linked with the purity of the nation. Therefore, maintaining the purity of upper-caste Hindu women was seen as essential to preserving the sanctity of the nation.

However, theatre was not initially viewed positively by the general public. Those who worked in or even watched theatre were often considered low-status—especially women. In the early stages, women did not participate in theatre at all. Female roles were performed by men, but male actors could not effectively embody the emotional and physical nuances of female characters. This led theatre practitioners to recognize the need to involve actual women in female roles. However, they were reluctant to involve “respectable” women from upper-class backgrounds, and those women themselves were unwilling to join a profession deemed immoral by society. They feared being labeled as indecent or unvirtuous.

As a result, women from lower social strata—particularly courtesans and sex workers—were brought in to play these roles. Though participation in theatre improved their economic conditions, they continued to be viewed with disdain by society. Ironically, the same women who were disrespected by upper-caste men were playing roles meant to educate the so-called respectable women about how to behave, appear, and speak.

This situation was not without criticism. Many people blamed theatre for corrupting society by involving “immoral” women. Independent and self-reliant women—especially those appearing in public spaces and participating in theatre—were often seen as having poor character. Even some social reformers who claimed to be working for the upliftment of women criticized the lifestyles of devadasis, courtesans, actresses, and Dalit women, arguing that their autonomy posed a threat to the moral fabric of upper-caste Hindu women. They feared that these women’s freedom would “contaminate” the rest of society, and thus advocated for their complete elimination to preserve the purity of elite women (Singh, 2012, pp. 189–213).

The notion of purity among upper-caste women was so dominant that even the British government hesitated to intervene in matters related to women. During the independence movement, when thousands of women responded to Mahatma Gandhi’s call and took to the streets, colonial authorities faced a dilemma. The British feared that if their soldiers misbehaved with Indian women while suppressing the movement, the political backlash would be severe. The British were aware of the symbolic power of Indian womanhood, tied to the purity of figures like Sita and Savitri. They understood that the purity of the Indian woman represented the purity of the Indian nation, and any foreign violation of this ideal would be unacceptable to the Indian populace (Thapar, 2006, pp. 142, 145).

3.3.4 Representation of Women in Pre-Independence Indian Cinema

In colonial India, filmmakers such as Himanshu Rai and Dadasaheb Phalke responded to foreign rulers and Western ideologies—particularly those related to nationalism, religion, Hindu virtue, the figure of the “evil Muslim,” and the ideal Hindu woman—through cinema, just as 18th-century writers like Govind Chandra Sen, R.C. Dutt, and Peary Chand Mitra did through their literary works. To awaken nationalist sentiment, instill patriotism and swadeshi ideals in the public, and celebrate the glory of Hindu civilization, films were produced with a specific ideological and religious orientation. The impact of these films varied across different social groups.

Early Indian cinema primarily aimed to portray Hindu civilization as superior to Western civilization, especially British modernity, education, industrialization, and liberalism. Thus, similar to nationalist writers and painters, early Hindi cinema relied heavily on Hindu religion, spirituality, and the female body to critique Western influence and assert the cultural superiority of India.

Dipesh Chakrabarty has explored the connection between mythological films and nationalism. He argues that, in pre-independence India, political structures were largely shaped by religious identity—primarily Hinduism—while non-Hindu religions were marginalized. Films such as *Raja Harishchandra*, *Bhakta Prahlad* (1926), *Bhakt Vidur* (1921), *Vande Mataram Ashram* (1926), *Shree Krishna Janma* (1919), *Kaliya Mardan* (1919), and *Prem Sanyas* were created not only to promote Hindu nationalism but also to elevate Hindu identity above Muslim identity.

Suresh Chabria notes that *Kaliya Mardan* featured devotional chants and songs alongside nationalist slogans. The demon Kaliya symbolized not only evil but also colonial exploitation. The very purpose of such films was ideological and symbolic (Sinha, 2013). This reveals that nationalism in colonial India was largely defined by the upper-caste Hindu male perspective.

Importantly, the growth of Indian and American cinema during colonial times began to challenge traditional social divisions based on religion, caste, class, region, and gender. However, it is also necessary to acknowledge that cinema sometimes misrepresented both European and Indian communities. According to Kathryn Hansen, cinema—like Nautanki—had the potential to critique social conventions and break sexual taboos. Yet, it also reinforced conservative values and perpetuated existing social hierarchies—particularly against women, lower castes, and non-Hindu communities.

Regarding the portrayal and impact on women, a distinct image emerges. In American films, Western women were depicted engaging freely with men—through dancing, singing, and liberal clothing—creating a negative perception among Indian audiences. For Indian viewers, especially men, this representation became a symbol of moral decay and a threat to Indian womanhood.

Because of the growing intensity of the freedom struggle, the British government banned films dealing with overtly political themes. Western films, with their portrayal of liberated women, were seen as a danger to Indian values and a corrupting influence on Indian women. Calcutta’s Chief of Police, Sir Charles Tegart, commented on the impact of cinema on purdah-observing women, noting that after watching Western films, they found it difficult to remain “civilized” at home. Tegart argued that cinema linked Indian women with their Western counterparts and, in doing so, set them free. In contrast, a lawyer from Lucknow, Mukundi Lal, saw this influence

as a sign of cultural degradation. A deeper fear was that women's participation in entertainment spaces as spectators could disrupt the domestic realm, thereby threatening "social" and "family values" (Sinha, 2013, pp. 17–24).

In 1920, to correct the image of Hindu women in cinema, filmmaker Himanshu Rai collaborated with German partners to produce mythological films that promoted Hindu nationalism. He introduced an Eurasian actress under the Hindu name "Sita Devi," presenting her to Indian audiences as the embodiment of the educated Hindu woman. Through films such as *Shiraz* and *Prapancha Pash*, Rai sought to portray the historical and spiritual glory of India. In *Achhut Kanya*, he presented a new image of the rural Hindu woman—a portrayal that profoundly influenced how rural women were depicted onscreen for decades (Datta, 2000, pp. 71–82).

Although Rai celebrated Indian history and Hindu femininity, he predominantly cast foreign women to play Hindu female roles. This reflects a broader pattern in colonial discourse, where colonial rulers feminized the colonized subject. The British justified their dominance over India by portraying themselves as masculine rulers bringing order to a feminized, chaotic land. In response, Indian nationalists began to visualize the nation as a woman—leading to the idealization of the female body as symbolic of the nation.

This symbolic construction divided women into two distinct categories: the idealized, goddess-like woman—usually representing upper-caste, elite Hindu femininity—and the undesirable, sexualized woman, often portrayed as a prostitute or a threat to moral order. This binary continues to shape representations of women in media today, where women are often categorized as either pure or impure (Oberoi, 1990).

Though the image of the ideal woman was initially created for elite women, it gradually influenced broader society. As lower-caste and marginalised communities began to emulate upper-caste values in an effort to improve their social status, they too started adopting these patriarchal norms of female behaviour and control.

From this perspective, the cultural image of women constructed in British India through the orientalist gaze, colonial writings, art, theatre, and later cinema was so deeply embedded that its influence continued to shape the representation of women even after independence. Theatre, print media, advertisements, and Hindi cinema played a significant role in circulating and normalising this idealised image of womanhood, gradually transforming it into a powerful cultural expectation. The portrayal of women in these mediums was not merely a reflection of society but also an active force in producing and reinforcing social consciousness about femininity, morality, and gender roles.

Thus, it becomes evident that the modern image of women as the devoted mother, obedient wife, self-sacrificing figure, and embodiment of ideal femininity—an image that continues to dominate media and social imagination today—has deep roots in colonial India. The legacy of colonial representations has not disappeared; rather, it has evolved into an entrenched value system within contemporary mass communication, continuing to influence how women are perceived, represented, and expected to perform their identities in society.

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