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Popular Culture & the Representation of Women's 'Agency' During Indian Partition

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The purpose of this paper is to critically explore the ways in which agency is wielded by women during events of mass violence and to explain that understanding agency is vital in order to move beyond essentialist categories of 'victims' and 'perpetrators'. In so doing, this paper will draw from postcolonial feminist literature and critical theory which provide some fundamental insights into the concept of agency. As the title of the paper indicates, the analysis of agency during partition violence in India will be drawn from the representation of women in popular culture and examine whether in their roles as agent's women act in compliance with or in opposition to the hegemonic patriarchal order. In order to develop this argument further, the paper will look at a period television film named *Tamas* (meaning Darkness) released in 1987 about the riots that broke out in India between the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities following the announcement of the decision to partition the country in 1947. The importance of popular culture in our everyday lives is underscored by the fact that the apparent resemblance of visual images to 'reality' often conceals the interpretive labor that has been performed in our reading (Rowley, 2010). In addition, the analysis of agency is crucial for enabling the transit from theory to praxis, whose importance was stated by Marx and which has been central to feminist theory since its inception. The paper aims to highlight the importance of the political ideas like intersectionality borrowed from Patricia Hill Collins (1986), one of the pioneers of black feminist thought, in suggesting the ways through which philosophical ideas can translate into political action.

In the theoretical context of postcolonial feminist scholars, such as Gayatri Spivak (1988), Chandra Mohanty Talpade (1988), Urvashi Bhutalia (1993, 2000) and so on, this article treats the question of gender identity as dependent upon the historical and contextual, and therefore unstable and subject to changes. For feminist scholars the contingent nature of identity becomes even more significant because feminism since its very beginnings has been preoccupied with the imposed nature of identities and the ways in which this can create opportunities for political activism. Women's agency in situations of mass violence needs scrutiny because the enactment of such an agency occurs within the patriarchal codes of moral conduct, and agency cannot be read outside of the dominant social and cultural institutions. Feminist historiography has often fallen into the trap of valorizing women's agency without realizing that most of the time such agency is displayed without challenging the dominant discourses of family and nation-state which are the very sources of their oppression. As will be discussed later in the article women often resorted to taking their own lives during the partition in order to avoid sexual violence and humiliation at the hands of men belonging to the 'other' community. These acts of self immolation by women were held upon by their communities to be the epitome of feminine virtue because their honor was inextricably linked to that of their society and nation. This paper will interrogate the problematic nature of such agency on the part of women because the honor they were said to be protecting was derived from a construction of masculinity that emphasized on male control over the sexuality of female kin.

As for its structure, this article consists of two main sections. The first section details the core contentions of postcolonial feminist literature, followed by a discussion of the ways in which it deals with the idea of agency and what gap exists in this literature in relation to the role of women's agency. The next section scrutinizes the period television drama *Tamas* in order to study the manner in which women's agency is dealt with in popular culture and identifying the discourses that are at work behind such representation. The reasoning in this section is driven by the need to devote attention to the margins, silences and bottom rungs of world politics which enables us to develop a

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more nuanced understanding of the ways in which power operates in the social system in a capillary fashion (Rowley, 2010; and Foucault 1977). The concluding section of this essay will expound that the role of agency needs to be considered not just in exceptional incidents like the one discussed here but also if one is to understand the dynamics of identity politics, power, and how subject positions (in this case of 'women') are constituted through the complex interaction between class, culture, religion and other ideological institutions and frameworks (Mohanty, 1988).

Before embarking on the body of the article some normative points should be noted here: in expounding the concept of agency this paper in no way seeks to suggest that women are not one of the worst affected groups during instances of mass violence. In fact rape and sexual violence are the most common instruments of subjugating women on such occasions particularly because patriarchal order associates the "honor" of women with the dignity of the community and this perpetuates even more emotional burden on the women who are the victims of various acts of sexual violence. Also the analysis in this paper is confined to only one event, that is, the violence that erupted at the time of the partition of India in 1947. The paper does not intend to suggest that the conclusions drawn here in relation to understanding women's agency may have universal application.

Postcolonial Feminism and the Interrogation of Agency

Postcolonial feminism is critical of the universal claims of western feminism to speak for all women and requires recognition of how the dominant representations of the world in literature, history or the media encourage people to forget about the lives of and experiences of disempowered groups. The dominant historiographies of partition have not paid much attention to the subaltern subjectivities. The personal narratives of women who have experienced the partition violence brings to light the ways in which female bodies are equated with the notions of home, religious communities, nations and national territories. Also the violence against women becomes a means of feminization of women's male counterparts who prove incapable of protecting "their" women/community/nation (Bacchetta, 2000; Bhutlia, 1998). Most studies of the partition violence in India documents the instances of killing and looting but do not categorize acts such as mass drowning among women as violent acts. The latter are embedded with symbolic meanings which rewrite the violence as an instance of bravery undertaken to protect one's honor which in the case of women is inextricably tied to their community (Bhutalia, 1993). In order to understand the concept of agency it is imperative to not assume men and women as already constituted sexual-political subjects prior to their entry into the arena of social relations (Mohanty, 1988).

Gayatri Spivak, in her famous work 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988), engages with the forms of agency available to subaltern women through their participation in the nationalist struggle in India. However she concludes that the subaltern woman cannot speak because the voice and agency of subaltern women are so embedded in Hindu patriarchal codes of moral conduct that even when they attempt to speak, their speech and acts are interpreted within the same boundaries which they were trying to negotiate. Despite being critical of western feminists for their tendency to paint all women with the same brush and ignoring their specific genealogies, postcolonial feminists *have* taken a different kind of essentialist positions themselves by relegating women entirely to the realm of the "oppressed" and of lacking agency. Postcolonial feminists have been more successful than western feminists in examining the various sites around which oppression is organized like the intersections of race, gender and class. However they have not considered the fact that multiple sites of oppression also provides more opportunities for political action and in events when such political action occurs one should consider whether it reinforces or undermines the hegemonic order. Also paramount in this respect is to consider the ways in which such political acts are read or consumed by society. A relevant political intervention with respect to the role of Third World Women and activism is made through Spivak's (1988) idea of strategic essentialism which is based on a context specific strategy that can serve as a short term solution for ending oppression and exploitation.

The constitution of social identity is an act of power. Derrida has discussed how identity's constitution is always dependent on excluding something and this also involves establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles (ed. Du Gay, Evans & Redman, 2000). This dichotomy in the Indian context can be particularly observed in relation to the nationalist movement which relied upon a 'material/spiritual' dichotomy, where the material was the sphere of the public and the masculine whereas the spiritual was the inner being essentially bestowed with feminine characteristics. Hence the nationalist movement emphasized the need for protecting the inner spiritual core whereas

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it was the materialist order which was to be the site for the battle for national independence and the inner spiritual sphere was to be protected from the influence of Western norms (Chatterjee, 1989). This dichotomy as will be argued in the paper was influential in instigating some of the acts of self-annihilation among particular groups of women as was observed during the partition riots. With the help of the above critical understanding, this article will proceed to elucidate the manner in which popular culture tackles the issue of women's agency while depicting incidents of mass violence.

Popular Culture, Mass Violence and the Representation of Women's Agency

This section of the paper will focus on a television series *Tamas* which is based on a Hindi novel of the same name written by Bhisham Sahni (1974) which won the author a Sahitya Academy Award (literary honor in India conferred on writers for outstanding work in the 24 Indian languages) in 1975. This mini series was also telecast as a 4 hour long feature film in History channel in the month of August. The rationale behind choosing a television series rather than a movie has been that the former allows the storyteller to portray a number of characters rather than focusing on only a few central ones which provides room for a more detailed analysis. With regards to the partition itself it should be borne in mind that it is not singular point in India-Pakistan history whose causes and consequences can be easily located in August 1947 when the partition plan actually materialized. The debates around partition precede much before that and its consequences are still very much alive in both the countries. The television series captures the lives of women belonging to different communities and also with varied economic standings. Hence, the paper will draw from the series the most relevant instances for scrutinizing and examining agency. This would make the evaluation and analysis of agency more interesting and it also fits in with the agenda of post-colonial feminist scholars who assert the differences in the experiences of women across diverse cultural and social boundaries.

The partition violence happened at a time while the British were still exercising a degree of authority in India and complete transfer of power had not taken place. The feature captures the dilemma of a colonial administrator who finds himself unable to grasp the full force of the 'communal hatred' until too late. The administrator's wife is too perplexed by the violence she confronts in an Oriental land, although the racial difference does not make her feel threatened from the violence ensuing outside their bungalow. She keeps urging her husband to prevent the situation of communal hatred from escalating, though she has very little understanding of the same. The only time we see her moving out of her enclosed space is when she goes to treat the people in the camps set up for the victims of the communal violence. What kind of agency does a 'white lady' exercise when we see her helping the wounded and homeless victims of the communal violence? This question cannot be answered without first of all acknowledging the fact that British colonial enterprise derived its legitimacy from the so called civilized behavior of the colonizers as opposed to the uncouth colonized people. The civilizing behavior of the colonizers was to a great extent dependent upon the 'lady like behavior' of their women, who fitted well into the private/public dichotomy, and would not transgress the boundaries of set out by the colonial patriarchal structure. The agency she exercises does not in any way serve to threaten the hegemonic order of the society she inhabits. She compares her duty to serve the victims of the religious pogrom to her service for the British soldiers in England at the time of the war. She does not express any desire to understand the dynamics and causes behind the violence and plays into the roles set out for women of being the 'caregiver' and 'nurturer' while at the same time remaining apolitical, thereby not stepping into the public space.

There are two female characters in the feature whose display of agency pushes the boundary of the hegemonic order but remains contained within it. In the course of this discussion a reference can be made to the idea of 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak 1988) which was mentioned earlier in the paper as the incidents discussed below bring into focus context specific strategies which are capable of offering short term solutions. At one instance in the series we see a Sikh female character running to help a young Muslim man whose house is surrounded by other young Sikh rioters. She takes up a sword and warns the men of her own community to dare touch this man and finally helps him find a safe haven. Another scene in the feature depicts a Muslim woman hiding a Hindu family in her house and attempting to protect them from the male members of her family. It should be borne in mind that the subject positions of women are constituted in and through their familial and communal discourses. The question that arises here is the extent to which women can exercise agency while remaining within the boundaries of their communal identity which is based on upholding the gender differences and where the dominant discourses allocate to women the role of the

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potential victims whose dignity needs protection from the men of the 'other' community. The two instances described above nonetheless point out that women are often capable of acting as protectors in particular contexts even if they fail to radically transform the patriarchal hegemonic order. It is crucial to make this argument because the dominant narratives of partition have barely managed to document such events. It is only through the work of feminists like Bhutalia (2000) that these personal narratives of women have become known in India. Thus a paper like the present one strives to bring the margins to the mainstream, listening to the silences and challenge the hegemonic utterances within academia itself.

The other example that will be set forth here defies our usual conception of agency in a much more profound manner. The scene being referred to here is one where a group of Sikh women resort to taking their own lives lest they are left at the mercy of men belonging to the 'other' community. Considering that women are often subjected to humiliating sexual atrocities at the hands of rival groups during communal violence, can taking away one's own life imply agency? Or are these women simply abiding by the dominant narratives that associate the violation of their bodies with the debasing of their community as a whole? This question is also linked to our perceptions of violence and whether the symbolic meanings attached to such acts take them outside the conventional interpretations of violence. These questions elude any simple answer because in the dominant discourses of violence against women such acts of mass self immolation are usually seen as acts of bravery. The agency here is an immensely problematic as the women unquestioningly accept the narratives of patriarchy as well as the practices and rhetoric that construct one's own community vis-à-vis the 'other' which is demonized. The nationalist struggle for India as mentioned earlier in the article juxtaposed the inner spiritual core of women's lives from the material struggle of the men and for the men to succeed in their nationalist ambitions the inner-spiritual-feminine core needed to be protected. The act of symbolic mass self immolation can be viewed as an extension of this nationalist discourse which now informed the predominantly Hindu Indian nation-state whose identity and purity had to be protected at the expense of these women because the failure of the state and community to protect them from the 'other' community would entail an emasculation of the nation's patriarchal identity.

Agency as illustrated in the above discussion was displayed in a variety of forms during the time of the post-partition violence. Although this article is focused on the discussion of women's agency and the dilemmas involved in interpreting such agency, it should be noted that social identities can be equally oppressive for men and agency exercised by men is also embedded within the dominant structure. A very telling example of this is demonstrated in *Tamas* when a lower caste man is ordered to kill a pig by a local administrator. Without knowing the reason for such an order, he complies by it, only to later realize that the animal killed by him was placed outside a mosque (Islamic law prohibits the consumption of pork) and which in the film becomes the reason for antagonizing the Muslim community. In this case gender identity is subsumed under the more pre-dominant caste identity. A man occupying the lower rung of the caste ladder, here, can only obey instructions and not exercise any effective agency.

Agency is essential for identity construction and for performing the roles assigned to individuals and groups within the social order. Discerning agency is a prerogative for any counter hegemonic political enterprise. It might not be possible to transform dominant discourses through a single political act, however small acts of resistance which have the potential to push the boundaries of the accepted nature of society should be given its due recognition. Probing into the nature, scope and limitations of such acts can help to create more opportunities for resistance and enable an interrogation of some of the basic ideas used to control dominated groups in general. An academic engagement with the idea of agency will not only highlight the interlocking nature of oppression but further facilitate more dialogues across groups of people who are caught in the dichotomous oppositional differences implying hierarchical relationships of domination and subordination (Collins 1986).

Conclusion

In answering the question of how agency is wielded by women in events of mass violence it is fundamental to consider that the constitution and consolidation of social identity is never complete without what Stuart Hall (1996) very rightly terms as the 'constitutive outside.' This article, through its discussion of agency, has thrown light on how the absence of discussions related to women's agency in official histories plays a role in creating these essentialist categories of women as "victims" and men as "perpetrators". Identity, including gender identity, is always subject to

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a process of change and transformation. This discussion of agency shows how the boundaries separating gender identities are often fluid. Moreover the identification of women as mere victims of mass violence also plays a role in the formation of national identity. Bhutalia (1993) in her research draws attention to one such government policy initiated after the partition whereby India and Pakistan agreed upon exchanging the women abducted during partition violence and returning them to their original families. This policy was implemented much against the wishes of many women on both sides who were reluctant to return to their original homes for fear of the stigma they would have had to confront once they were forced back to their former families. However both nations felt the need for getting their women back as it was more a means of consolidating the patriarchal identity of the newly formed nation states. This move was even more perplexing on the part of India which projected its identity as a secular state but took up this rather contradictory policy of demanding the Hindu women abducted during the partition to be returned to India and returning the Muslim women to Pakistan. Here the secular state of India was once again drawing from the Hindu nationalist identity which was based on the dichotomy of the inner-spiritual-feminine core and the materialist-outer-masculine core. Protecting the purity of the inner core was the prerogative of the new Indian nation state.

Postcolonial feminism, despite its relatively radical theoretical interventions, has not translated into any major political intervention which can mark a departure from the already existing ones. For instance, in India, academics writing about feminism and those engaged in feminist politics have ventured to draw a distinction between the biological female body and the gendered female body which would also enable a challenge to heteronormativity. However the manner in which 'gender' is appropriated by the state apparatus in India through its development discourse allows a complete inter-changeability of 'gender' and 'women' (Menon, 2009).

Last but not least, the critically informed analysis of women's agency in this article also brings us a little closer to the possibility of feminist political interventions. Feminist interventions are premised upon an understanding of privilege along with an awareness of the various intersections along which political action should be organized and as Spivak (1988) very appropriately suggests the need to infer 'our privilege as our loss'. Feminism draws upon examining one's own position as a theorist and discerning the privileges bestowed on account of one's social standing. The challenge for feminism remains to devise means for contesting the political knowledge-validation processes that have resulted in the externally defined images of women which serve to bracket them as 'victims', 'oppressed' and as those incapable of playing the role of agents (Collins, 1986). In a postcolonial society like India, challenging domination means, in part, transcending these tactics which devalue the subjectivity of the oppressed. In a caste divided society like that of India, feminist politics should be premised upon a more holistic approach which will take into cognizance the patriarchal strategy of divide-and-conquer which is evident in not just instances of violence as the one discussed in this paper but also in our everyday lives.

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