

Women Undoing ‘National’ Histories Through Regional Cinema: A 1980s Perspective on Gender and Reform in Colonial India

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Two of the most overlooked aspects of Indian cinema are films by women directors, and films in regional languages. Despite the growing literature on gender and cinema, there is very little published on Indian women filmmakers – the most one comes across is an inclusion of Deepa Mehta or Mira Nair under the ‘women of colour’ section in international anthologies. This is possibly because women’s filmmaking in India has been dispersed across regional languages, and only begins to come together after the 1980s as some sort of identifiable trope of women’s/ feminist cinema. Part of the problem with the absence of recognition lies in the similar treatment meted out to regional language cinema, the history and theorisation of which has largely taken place within the languages concerned, with little translation, and hence no trans-regional or trans-national circulation. This is certainly not to say that there are no studies of regional cinemas, but these remain largely disproportionate to the scale of production in regional languages. For example, out of the 1288 films produced in the country in 2009, only 235 were in Hindi, which is the national language. The rest – that is over 1050 films were made in 23 other regional languages, the majority of them in Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada.

I want to bring these two concerns together in this paper in examining 3 films by Indian women directors: Phaniyamma; Rao Saheb and Sati – all made in the 1980s, all in different regional languages – and all dealing with the theme of gender and social reform in colonial India with a view to locating theoretically this specific body of women’s filmmaking in a relational context to the nation – both in terms of national history as well as national cinema. In doing so, I bear in mind Claire Johnston’s perceptive advice that doing feminist film history is not simply a matter of reintroducing women into an untransformed history, as yet another series of facts to be assimilated into a pre-existing chronology.

This paper comes out of a longer chapter that I’m working on for a book manuscript on Indian women filmmakers, where I have looked to integrate the biographical with the textual and historical in a more sustained way; but for the purpose of this presentation, I shall have to contend with outlining brief and selective snapshots of a broad discursive terrain.

I will start by introducing the politics of the discourse of social reform and gender in colonial India, moving on to the depiction of this discourse in the three films; and finally by asking how the socio-political realities of feminism relate to textual politics in the Indian context.

The central narrative of Indian history throughout the colonial period is premised on a discourse of gender. Three broad strokes to this narrative can be outlined as follows:

1. the coloniser- colonised relationship is organised in gendered terms;
2. Indian men were generally speaking deemed as being effeminate by the colonialists, which resulted in a glorification of martial qualities in some nationalist responses, including from many women – which is also why Gandhi’s gender role reversal of nurturing seemingly feminine virtues like spinning and fasting was seen as a clever counter-strategy in terms of changing the rules of the game;
3. the moral right to imperial domination was justified by pointing towards what was perceived as being the degenerate position of women in Indian society.

A combination of what was partly British cultural and racial arrogance, and failure to comprehend the nuances of Indian social life, along with what were in actuality highly oppressive practices towards women, invoked intense responses from British, as well as Indian men and women. What became popularly alluded to as ‘the women’s question’, so to speak, became the central symbolic issue in determining whether Indians were fit to govern themselves or not. The nuances of this debate were many, but broadly speaking, the quest was on to fashion a new modern identity for the women of India - one that would justify independence. It is not surprising, that the ‘problems’ that first caught the attention of the British as well as the Indian reformists were visibly repressive practices such as sati and widowhood rituals. The Widow Remarriage Act, the Age of Consent Bill, and the Abolishment of Sati Act – all had a direct or indirect bearing on the status of widows. Along with a new charter for women’s education, codes of dressing, and movement in public, the project of crafting the modern - yet modest - new Indian woman was in full swing. A large number of films made in the pre-independence era – generically referred to as the socials - pay testimony to this national imaginary of the Indian woman, who was expected to play the multiple roles of dutiful wife, nurturing mother, faithful companion, sacrificing nationalist, and upholder of traditional values.

However, what was construed as a 'national' discourse on gender and reform, often took on different inflections and urgencies in regional contexts. This regional diversity has all but been sacrificed in much of Hindi cinema – arguably, even a film like Deepa Mehta's *Water*, which is made by a woman, settles for a re-constructed depiction of the ghats of Benaras, which is exactly the site that colonial attention too was focused upon. Although this was an experience shared by women across the country it was not experienced in the same way everywhere and by everyone since rituals and customs differed by region and caste. Contrary to these differences, what has been depicted in a lot of literature on the subject, focuses on practices such as sati which were localised to the North of the country but depicted as a 'national issue'. On the other hand, the question of sexuality – which was more pressing in its repercussions for women's day-to-day lives in parts of Southern India, were not adequately addressed by the reformist discourse.

Phaniyamma, *Rao Saheb*, and *Sati* too deal with the subject of widowhood, but in different locations and contexts. The regional rootedness of these films not only attests to the fiction of the 'national' homogeneity of the reform movement, but also speaks from a position of marginality in relation to the theorisation of Indian cinema per se, where much of the attention has been devoted to a study of Hindi cinema, which too – to some extent successfully – stands in as the 'national' cinema.

Historical films, like an exile, are characterised by liminality; they function in the here and now of their production as translators, interpreting and representing for their immediate audiences some distant other - time, place, people. Thus, willy nilly, they are landed with the complicated role of cultural translation. Such films take on meaning in the context of the historical discourse (in this case colonial India) as well as contemporary discourse (either socio-political, cultural or theoretical) – that is, they must be at once meaningful to both past and present. Instead of viewing these films as realistic representations of colonial India, I will look at them as 1980s interpretations of colonial India – or assign them with the work of cultural/historical translation.

Phaniyamma, the Kannada film, is an adaptation of M.K. Indira's (1976) novel of the same name. The novel is based on the actual life-story of a woman called Phaniyamma who from 1870 to her death in 1952 lived in the small village of Hebbalige in Malnad, Karnataka. The woman's story was told to M.K. Indira's mother when Phaniyamma came to help her give birth to a child (Rajdhyaaksha and Willemen, 1995). The film depicts the life of Phaniyamma

(played by Sharda Rao) over a seventy-year period against the backdrop of Brahmin orthodoxy. In brief, the film's story is that Phani is married at the young age of nine, as was common practice in the 19th century, and is widowed soon after when her young groom dies of snake bite. Phani is made to undergo all the rituals of widowhood, shave her head, and take up an austere life. The film documents the changes in the village - especially the slow decline of Brahmin orthodoxy and improved social circumstances for women – through Phani's point of view, which in the film is transcribed always through a reflective, personal, biographical and interrogative aesthetic. The fact that national independence is attained at some point in the narrative is unmarked in the film, and so is, to a great extent, the wider political sentiment across the country. The film deals with the immediate and personal repercussions of social customs, rituals and taboos in terms of their impact on women. Rather than write a narrative of 'national progress', a narrative of progress is marked through and upon Phani's body - from birth to death, her body becomes a repository of the changes that have taken place in her immediate society. The editing and cinematography is highly stylised and together with the mise-en-scene and the framing of space, works to ideologically construct a mode of beckoning – a possible subject positioning – that foregrounds desire (both its restriction and its realisation) using an intimately personal idiom rooted in folk traditions. It is worth noting that the director, Prema Karanth, worked extensively with her husband, the acclaimed theatre personality B V Karanth on developing folk dance forms such as the yakshagana, which are amply present in the film as a mode of narration.

The next film is Vijaya Mehta's 1986 Marathi film *Rao Saheb*, which is based on Jayant Dalvi's play *Barrister* (1977). It stages the conflict between inherited customs (read 'tradition') – especially widowhood rituals - and the reform movement (read 'modernity') offering a critique of these movements in India. The conflict is staged through the characters of Radhakka (Neelu Phule), a provincial, working class woman whose husband dies leaving her a widow - and Rao Saheb (Anupam Kher), an England-educated, Anglicised, upper class barrister, living in an opulent mansion with an old aunt, maushi (played by Vijaya Mehta). Both of them are curious about the other's strange and foreign ways, and Rao Saheb finds in Radhakka, an ideal subject to educate and reform, so to speak. Thus, when her husband dies, he vehemently protests her having to shave off her head or take up the lifestyle of a widow, which she does, nonetheless, on her father-in-law's insistence. Maushi, the old aunt, suggests that Radhakka and Rao Saheb marry each other – but this doesn't materialise, since Rao Saheb remains indecisive about the matter, and as an act of

rebellion, Radhakka, shaves off her head and begins again to follow the rituals of widowhood. The aesthetics of this film are feminist in an interventionist sense rather than feminine in an open-ended manner and the politics of this choice gains meaning in the context of Mehta's own biographical formation.

Mehta has recorded vividly, the influences on her life, work, and philosophy in her essay called 'Abode of Colours' in Leela Gulati and Jasodhara Bagchi's book *A Space of her Own*. Here she talks about the two figures in her pre-theatre life that influenced her the most – one was her mother, a strong-willed, religious-minded matriarch, who had perfected the act of looking after the diverse needs of a large household; the other was her progressive humanist uncle, VB Karnik, whose house she pretty much grew up in, and from whom she inherited her atheistic outlook in her young days. As one of the most radical figures of Marathi theatre in the 1960s and a founder of the experimental theatre group Rangayana, Mehta describes in her reflective biographical account that her theatre career allowed her to resolve the contradictions between the strong feminism, and regressive ritualism she simultaneously witnessed in her growing up years with her mother and grandmother. I quote:

The women whose role I played in theatre became a part of my real world. Through them I discovered my mother and grandmothers. My friends from the West argued with me, saying that women of the early 20th century found compensation because they had no choices. Their criticism presupposes that, compared to us present-day women, my mother and grandmother had fewer choices. With the forces of globalisation and progress, we do have more choices, but the strength, wisdom and endurance with which my mothers and grandmothers coped with life make them perhaps stronger than us modern women. They were governed by their social norms and ethical codes of conduct as we are by ours. They found an identity, distinct and centred, something that we also strive for. (Mehta, 2005, pg. 201)

The manner in which Mehta interprets the women from her family clearly come to bear upon the characters she portrays in her films, as is seen from the character of maushi, who bears striking resemblance with her description of her own grandmother. This is more than mere coincidence as Mehta approaches the question of progress and development from a pragmatic point of view, rooted to the real lives of the women she has known; in asking what constitutes women's progress in *Rao Saheb*, the answer she offers is that mere disavowal of widowhood

rituals are by themselves meaningless outside of structural reforms that have real significance for the betterment of women's lives.

Sumit Sarkar has criticised feminist scholarship that has taken the position that the reform movements in colonial India were no good because they were 'western' inspired, arguing that the abolition of sati, the increase of the age of consent, the desire to improve the condition of widows could not be seen as anything but progressive. While agreeing with Sarkar's point of view, I would argue that on a pan-Indian scale, this is absolutely true, but the ways in which oppressive regimes influenced women differed across regions of India; also, the question of women's progress was deeply influenced by the key drivers of the local social reform movements – in Maharashtra, for example, there had been a history of caste consciousness and women's education, established through the work of Jyotiba Phule, and then later followed through in the political leadership of Ambedkar at a national level. Padma Anagol's exhaustive research on feminism in Maharashtra, documents in detail how women in Maharashtra contributed towards addressing the 'women's question' and to shaping what progress and reform should constitute between the period 1850-1920.

To further this point, the social problems that needed reform too differed across regions:

[for example, an extract from Mountstuart Elphinstone's 'Indian Customs and Manners', written in 1840 states the following on the subject of sati:

"...The practice (of sati) is by no means universal in India. It never occurs to the south of the river Kishna; and under the Bombay presidency, including the former sovereignty of the Bramin Peshwas, it amounts to thirty-two in a year. In the rest of the Deccan it is probably more rare. In Hindostan and Bengal it is so common that some hundreds are officially reported as burned annually within the British dominions alone....."]

[Source: From: Eva March Tappan, ed., *The World's Story: A History of the World in Story, Song and Art*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), Vol. II: India, Persia, Mesopotamia, and Palestine, pp. 169-179]

It is well documented that sati was predominantly prevalent in Bengal, Rajasthan, and parts of Northern India. On the other hand, in what could loosely be called the South, including predominantly Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Orissa, the key reformist question revolved around the status of devdasis, who were temple dancers, ritually married off to the temple deity in service to them, but permitted to have a sexual life and bear children by choice. These were lower caste women, unlike the upper caste suttees. Thus, the force-fields of reformist discourse and the bodies upon which they acted or were directed towards were not uniform across the country. Nonetheless, a dominant narrative about the reform movement and its relationship with gender and nation has been established through the tomes of influential scholarship that have addressed mainly the specificities of Bengal. Recognisable snapshots of this discourse includes the figure of the bhadralok (or respectable middle class) woman; the division between andarooni/baharooni (inner and outer sanctums, architecturally, physically and metaphorically) – most poignantly depicted in all its complex symbolism in Tagore’s novel and Satyajit Ray’s film *Ghare Baire* – which is also the conceptual tool Partha Chatterjee puts forward in explaining the disappearance of the women’s question from national public discourse by the early 20th century – that is, he says, that women had been relegated to the inner sphere that had to be preserved in pristine form as an allegory of nation, while men wore the mantle of outer change. It has been pointed out that this theory doesn’t recognise or account for women’s agency – and the idea of the inner sanctum as a political site has been explored in plenty of feminist scholarship. This brings me to a discussion of the last film, which presents something of a limit case in its politics of gender in terms of its representation of its central protagonist, Uma, as a mute girl.

Aparna Sen’s film *Sati* predates (in terms of the historical period it is set in) this crucial strategic 20th century shift that Partha Chatterjee identifies and is set in 1828 (a year before Sati was abolished) in the hay-day of Ram Mohun Roy’s activism. The film offers a thumping critique of Brahmin orthodoxy – exposing the manner in which marriage and death functioned centrally as rituals within a wider economy of transaction, especially in relation to the Kulin Brahmin practice of polygamy. Each new marriage brought a new bride price – and thus more income to run the household. Uma, who is orphaned at birth, has been brought up by her mother’s brother and his wife, who consider her as a mere liability. Uma is cursed with a horoscope that promises certain widowhood, and hence finds no suitable suitor. Moreover, she stands in the way of a younger daughter’s marriage, and on the advice of a learned priest, she is married off to a peepul tree that she is particularly fond of – a ritual, the

priest assures, that is sanctioned by the holy books. Soon after, she falls victim to a clandestine sexual seduction by the village teacher, becomes pregnant, refuses to identify the father and is thrown out to live in the cowshed by her family. On a stormy night, the cowshed is washed away; Uma seeks shelter under the peepul tree which gets uprooted in the storm, and dies. The villagers declare her a sati.

It is important to remind ourselves that this film was made two years after the case of Roop Kanwar was burnt alive as a sati in Deorala district of Rajasthan. This incident had attracted great media attention and public debate, and had instigated a revived feminist movement in the country. A number of arguments – not too jaded from public memory – had been put forward both against and in support of the practice of sati. Thus, the film entered into an already existing discursive context that was not only historical and distant, but also contemporary. The aesthetic choice of representing Uma as a mute character has been described by Shoma Chatterjee, who has published a book (2002) on Aparna Sen's films, as symbolising abjectness. I would argue contrary to this – although at the risk of theorising based upon a single subjective reading of a text – that Uma's muteness represents the despair of the situation, signalling the lack of any real choice for women, both in the historic context, but also, in the 1980s context. That this disenchantment with society is what the filmmaker wants to point towards through Uma's silence, rather than towards Uma's own victimhood. The subsumption to the drama of a larger life (not to be read as fatalism), that one sees in Sati, and the use of the body as means of marking resistance – seen in Rao Sahib too, but also in other noteworthy literary texts such as the short story *Dopdi Mehjen* by Mahasveta Devi is a common – and political -feature of a lot of women's writing and filmmaking in South Asia.

The three films individually constitute strong feminist texts – although besides the subject matter, it is hard to say that there is a binding aesthetic approach that is common to them. I conclude with the suggestion that more significantly, it is the positioning of these texts, individually and together, within the discursive context of colonial history, the dominant narrative on gender and reform, and the assumed place of Hindi cinema as national cinema – all of which they unsettle – that represents their real feminist politics and potential.