

NATION AS MOTHERLAND: DECONSTRUCTING THE IMAGE OF “BHARAT MATA”

Bidisha Mukherjee

Research Scholar, Vidyasagar University, West Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT

The practice of representing nation-state through the metaphor of the mother is a patriarchal ploy of exploitation and subjugation that perpetuates its function by confining women to gender stereotypes. In the Indian nationalist discourse, the evocation of the image of “Bharat Mata”, though usually upheld as an instrument of cultural triumph, leads to similar sorts of exploitation. Glorifying the sacrificial attributes of mother, such analogy reinforces the gender stereotype that proposes to delimit women only up to the task of reproduction and nurture and denies all other forms of existence. Through an analysis of the evolution of the image of “Bharat Mata” over the course of the Indian nationalist struggle and post-Independence politics, the research article will make an attempt to assess the significance and implications of the mother-nation analogy from a feminist perspective.

KEYWORDS: *Nation, Motherhood, “Bharat Mata”, Gender Role, Gender Stereotype*

INTRODUCTION

Comparing nation to motherland and the use of the metaphor of the nurturing benevolent mother to refer to the nation is a global phenomenon which seem to be largely controlled by the patriarchal capitalist discourse which derives the analogy from the essentialist attitude adopted with regards to notions of motherhood and care-giving. It confines women to the inner space of domestic life by delimiting their capabilities only to reproductive and nurturing functions and, at the same time, normalizes and institutionalizes the concept by repeated reference to it as a sacrosanct and exclusive notion across multiple media including literature, newspaper article, drama, song, painting and sculpture, cinema, daily soap and advertisement. This is clearly evident in the ideology of “Bharat-Mata” in the literature, art, song, and drama of the colonial period in India where the cult of a Mother Goddess as the Deity or the divine soul of the nation has been glorified which, by means of deifying motherhood as a divine phenomenon, added upto a myth of women strength and power while robbing real women off the real power of participating actively in external activities by being confined to the role of reproduction and nurture, i.e. the two basic goals and functions of motherhood as per the patriarchal discursive construction of that ideology. Accordingly, freedom-fighting was considered a task preserved generally for men who were seen as the glorious sons of the divine “Bharat Mata”. Through an analysis of the evolution of the image of “Bharat Mata” over the course of the Indian nationalist struggle and post-Independence politics, the research article will make an attempt to assess the significance and implications of the mother-nation analogy from a feminist perspective.

The concept of “Bharat Mata” has emerged, according to most of the historians, in the 1800s. The concept was mentioned for the first time in written form by Kiran Chandra Bannerjee in a play entitled *Bharat Mata* (1873). The play is about a married couple finding out a temple in the midst of a forest dedicated to Mother India which leads them to initiate

protest against the colonial rule. The politicization of the Hindu religious and cultural aspects intersecting notions of motherhood is thus from the very beginning in function. The metaphor rapidly gained secular and national character with the publication of *Anandamath* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee which tried to associate the physical and cartographical dimensions of the Indian subcontinent under the British rule with the image of the mother-as-goddess; and the representation of the song “Vande Mataram” from the novel in the 1896 Congress by Rabindranath Tagore which gained further momentum with the Swadeshis in the 1900s taking it up as the motto in the struggle for independence. Amidst the various factors such as religion, caste, class, language, community, culture, and region that segregated and diversified the masses across the subcontinent, the images of the nation-as-motherland and the motherland-as-goddess promoted unity and solidarity towards struggle for evading the foreign rule and ushering in independence. The metaphor of the nation as the mother in danger in urgent need of rescue by her brave sons became the source of inspiration for generations of freedom-fighters to sacrifice their lives for the struggle for independence against the British rulers.

From the mendicant-like saffron-clad image of the benevolent mother-goddess with four hands holding four symbols of national solidarity, as popularized by Abanindranath Tagore as early as 1905 against the backdrop of Partition and the consequent protests, to that of a goddess clad in a saree, either “basanti” or golden or tri-colour, wearing a crown, also sometimes riding on a lion and holding a trident or a “trishul” if not the tri-colour national flag, the image of Mother India has gone through phases of ideological changes and has subtly been involved into the cultural politics of the nation not only during the colonial period but also in the post-independence era. Through all these, what had, rather has, remained constant is the connection between the self-sacrificing nurturing mother and the nation-as-the-mother or the motherland. Released one decade after the Independence, the Mehboob Khan directed movie “Mother India” is also seen celebrating only these aspects of the ideal Indian woman which, as the movie tries to highlight, are the only attribute which makes a mother as glorious as the nation, which is also known as the motherland. A close inquiry into the continuation of the nation-mother analogy thus points out how a metaphor generated to evoke patriotic sentiments and construct solidarity among the diverse communities during the colonial period has had inherent hegemonic motivations generated not from love for the nation but from patriarchal ideology. Associated images of a mother to be rescued by her sons, generating obvious metaphors of the colonized land as the violated entity and the colonizer as the male violating the chastity of the mother, and the brave sons avenging that insult – all these focus on the woman as nothing else than a reproductive entity. Addressing the inherent misogyny in the nation-mother analogy, Romila Thapar comments that the slogan “Bharat Mata ki Jai” is not “an attribute of patriotism, but of deep patriarchy. Extreme mother-love is a camouflage for extreme misogyny” (On, N. Pag). Though apparently seen as a metaphor for women’s inherent strength and abilities, worshipping the nation in the form of the mother can be seen as another way of abstraction, essentialization, and, thereby, dehumanization of the mother and in turn of the woman from her human attributes. Acknowledging a woman only as a mother and nothing else denies her the legitimacy of natural existence by right and becomes instrumental in exploiting both her productive and reproductive abilities within the patriarchal system.

The graver predicament, however, lies in the identification of the physical entity of the nation with the mother, an analogy that is built only on the basis of reproductive abilities. Gendering a geographical entity not only reinforces gender stereotypes and hierarchies but also reinforces the patriarchal strategy of subjugation in yet another form. In her article “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture”, Sherry Ortner addresses the “pan-cultural second-class status” of women and states: “women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with

culture. Since it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if women were considered part of nature, then culture would find it 'natural' to subordinate, not to say oppress, them" (73). She further elaborates, "It all begins of course with the body and the natural procreative functions specific to women alone" (73). In *The Second Sex*, Simon de Beauvoir has also focused on the closeness of women to the species life that associates her with nature and normalizes the subjugation of both in the hands of the patriarchal culture. Like Ortner, de Beauvoir has also pointed out how the physiological attributes of women are much more about proper functioning of the reproductive system than about her own self as a human being: "The finality of many ovarian secretions is in the egg, in its maturity, in the adaptation of the uterus for its needs: for the organism as a whole, they are a factor of imbalance more than regulation; the woman is more adapted to the egg's needs than to herself" (62). In the same tune, de Beauvoir has concluded that female "is more enslaved to the species than the male is, her animality is more manifest" (317). Ortner, too, says, "various aspects of woman's situation (physical, social, psychological) contribute to her being seen as closer to nature, while the view of her as closer to nature is in turn embodied in institutional forms that reproduce her situation" (87). Any attempted analogy between the body of the mother and the geographical terrain of a nation-state thus represents a dual exploitation of both by the patriarchal structure as inferior or subsidiary to men and culture.

The cult of the nation-as-motherland thus leads to possibilities of exploitation on the basis of gender. The essentialization of gender roles and the appropriation of identity only on the basis of biological attributes has led to the culture of mother-worship and at the same time has delimited opportunities and agencies of women at every level of existence. Once a metaphor of cultural revival and patriotic inspiration, the image of "Bharat Mata" has gone through several phases of jingoism and has turned into somewhat of a repressive association, at least for women, within the patriarchal discourse.

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