

GENDER

Gender and Nationalism: Partha Chatterjee, the “Women’s Question,” and the Home

Reviewed by STEPHEN LEGG

University of Cambridge, Cambridge, England

As part of the “Subaltern Studies” collective, Partha Chatterjee has examined the subaltern and historiographically silenced “fragments” of the modern Indian nation (Chatterjee, 1992, 1993). The earlier Subaltern Studies attempted to portray peasant uprisings as possessing a degree of autonomy, rather than viewing them as steps towards the formation of the nation or of class-consciousness (Prakash, 1990: 399). The later studies, however, have broadened the definition of the “subaltern” to include those minorities excluded from dominant narratives that only survive the colonial and nationalist archive in “fragments” (Ludden, 2001). Accessing these silenced voices, if possible at all, requires a methodological as well as theoretical shift, which entails opening up the repositories of songs, dramatics, paintings, architecture, bodily revolt, and memoirs to academic scrutiny (Pandey, 1995: 225).

Fracturing the binaries of dominator/dominated, coloniser/colonised, master/slave, and self/other, Chatterjee has been at the forefront of studies that stress the “middleness” and “betweenness” of most social groups, allowing the consideration of the “subalternity of the elite” (1992: 42). Amongst the most celebrated of these discussions has been his work on the “Women’s Question” that emerged in late-nineteenth-century Bengal (Chatterjee, 1993). The middle class itself emerged as subordinate to the colonial government, yet they became leaders of the urban and rural poor. Within the middle classes women remained disadvantaged, despite earlier discussions amongst the intellectual elites regarding their uplift. Chatterjee attributes the failed realisation of the egalitarian urge to the emergence of a “new patriarchy,” one that crafted a “new woman” who, while educated, had her subjectivity spatially delimited.

It has been argued that the nationalist movement negotiated the phenomenon of colonial modernity by insisting that in the material, external world of science, industry, and politics, India could adapt to European influence. However, the spiritual, internal world of tradition was what was truly “essential” and had to be protected. This “inner” world was associated with the space of the home, and this domain was undeniably the realm of women. As a result, women were

represented in nationalist discourses as the protectors of Indian tradition and spiritualism, enclosed within the sanctuary of the home. This would be women's contribution to the nationalist movement – a subjectivity to be called forth and interpolated, and a body waiting to be inscribed and formed by nationalist discourse. Although Chatterjee attempts to investigate how women actively contributed to the political programme, he concludes that women were ultimately betrayed and that the home became the tragic site of their containment (1993: 154).

While his analysis of the emergence of a patriarchal nationalist discourse is persuasive, Chatterjee's reading of women's autobiographies and memoirs forecloses a consideration of their agency and ingenuity (Viswaswaran, 1996; Bannerji, 2000). Just as a study of Orientalism without critique merely reproduces colonial discourse, so an analysis of nationalist discourse without an emphasis on its failings, ruptures, and contradictions merely perpetuates the "silencing" of those the Subalternists are trying to "hear." Feminist debates on both nationalism and the home have attempted to reverse the pessimism of contemporary discourses by showing how women can be political agents, not subjects, and how homes can be sites of political activity, not just withdrawal.

In summarising the literature on gender and nationalism, Kandiyoti (2000: 491-492) suggests that women have been portrayed as either representations of the nation or as social actors implicated in nationalist processes. Ranchod-Nilsson and Tétreault note a similar division and stress the consequences of such a division for the theorisation of women within nationalist movements: "The shift from a focus on women's activism within nationalist movements to the gendered representations of symbols intrinsic to projects of national construction can too easily obscure women's political activism, and the diversity of nationalist projects in which women are engaged" (Ranchod-Nilsson and Tétreault, 2000: 5). Chatterjee's focus on "women-as-symbols" dislocates their presence from the realm of performance and agency to that of representation and subjection. Ranchod-Nilsson and Tétreault (2000: 2) express their frustration with such forms of writing, which, if considering women at all, emphasise the lack of long-term benefits for women in such movements. Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1989: 7) have stressed that while women may be talked *about* in nationalist movements, they themselves can also *actively* participate in ideological discussions and national, economic, political, or military struggles. But what theoretical framework can be adopted that will facilitate the study of female nationalism – one that does not presume their ultimate subjection, yet does not rely on a radical perspective that privileges the minority of women who wholly reject their former lives in order to devote themselves to the nation?

In feminist literature, the home has often been portrayed as a site of subjection and female domination, much in line with Chatterjee's work. In a lucid appraisal of conceptions of the home, Young (1997) has stressed that the home has been depicted as a place erected at women's expense. Rather than referring to the literature on unpaid domestic labour (see Felski, 1995; Massey, 1994), Young summarises the more cultural and philosophical writings about the home. While de Beauvoir argued that the home has been a site in which women have nurtured and supported others but received little support in return, Irigaray has critiqued Heidegger's work on dwelling in which Man constructs and wanders while Woman maintains and is immobile (Young, 1997: 134). This perspective has also been replicated in post-colonial literature. The domestic is often seen as a space of withdrawal from the harsh public world of politics, working again to de-politicise the home and represent women who stay there as introspective and inactive. Martin, Mohanty and de Lauretis, however, have criticised the ways in which the home is linked to a stable identity based on the exclusion of the non-middle class and the non-white.

Honig (1994: 579) accepts the call to "resist the seductions of the home," but she also acknowledges the need to theorise the connections between the home and elsewhere. While granting the need for a "coalitional politics" that challenges the female subject and forces her into spaces of risk and instability, such a form of politics ultimately relies on the home because it is impossible to "constantly coalesce." bell hooks (1991: 145) likewise acknowledges the need to "choose the margin" as a radical site of locational politics, seeking out those sites and activities that challenge societal norms and hegemonies. Yet, while this urge to confront harsh social realities impels one to leave the home, one also has to return. hooks views the home as a site that promotes varied and changing perspectives and new ways of seeing (1991: 148). "Homeplaces" are constructed in the face of oppressive cultures and act as havens, even if women have been put in these places by a patriarchal society. While hooks is not without her critics (see Pratt, 1998 for an overview), the debate about the degree to which she reifies the home and fortifies the public-private division encourages a discussion about the activities within the home, a debate which is effectively foreclosed by Chatterjee's portrayal of the home as a site of betrayal and subjection.

My own doctoral research compliments the literature examining the domestic as a site of female agency and productivity during the Indian nationalist movement in the twentieth century (Kishwar, 1986; Legg, 2003; Patel, 1988; Thapar-Björkert, 1997). These studies show that while there may have been a resurgent patriarchal discourse during the nationalist movement, many women used Gandhi's incitations to "nationalise" the home as an

opportunity to participate in a nation-wide movement from within the confines of their "homeplaces." While many women emerged from previously secluded domestic lives, many more contributed to the movement from within the walls of the home, adapting traditional duties and activities to newly politicised ends. In stressing these activities, which often went unrecorded and rarely entered the official archives, the representation of women as the subjects of nationalism is counter-balanced by the urge to see and hear women as active agents within diverse and trans-scalar political movements.

References

- Bannerji, H. (2000) Projects of hegemony; towards a critique of Subaltern Studies' 'Resolution of the Women's Question.' *Economic and Political Weekly* 35(11): 902-920.
- Chatterjee, P. (1992) A religion of urban domesticity; Sri Ramakrishna and the Calcutta middle class. In Chatterjee, P. and Pandey, G. (eds.) *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society Vol. 7*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- (1993) *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Felski, R. (1995) *The Gender of Modernity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Honig, B. (1994) Difference, dilemmas, and the politics of the home. *Social Research* 61(3): 563-597.
- hooks, b. (1991) *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. London: Turnaround.
- Kandiyoti, D. (2000) Guest Editor's Introduction: The awkward relationship: gender and nationalism. *Nations and Nationalism* 6(4): 491-94.
- Kishwar, M. (1986) *Gandhi and Women*. New Delhi: Manushi Prakashan.
- Legg, S. (2003) Gendered politics and nationalised homes: women and the anti-colonial struggle in Delhi, 1930-47. *Gender, Place and Culture* 10(1).
- Ludden, D. (2001) *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia*. Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Massey, D. (1994) *Space, Place and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Pandey, G. (1995) Voices from the edge: the struggle to write subaltern histories. *Ethos* 60(3-4): 223-42.
- Patel, S. (1988) Construction and reconstruction of woman in Gandhi. *Economic and Political Weekly* 23(8): 377-87.
- Prakash, G. (1990) Writing post-orientalist histories of the Third World: perspectives from Indian historiography. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32 (2): 383-408.
- Pratt, G. (1998) Geographic metaphors in feminist theory. In Aiken, S. H., Brighman, A., and Martson, S. A. (eds.) *Making Worlds: Gender, Metaphor, Materiality*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Reviews

- Ranchod-Nilsson, S. And Tetreault, M. A. (eds.) (2000) *Women, States and Nationalism: At Home in the Nation?* London: Routledge.
- Thapar-Björkert, S. (1997) The domestic sphere as a political site: a study of women in The Indian nationalist movement. *Women's Studies International Forum* 20(4): 493-504
- Viswaswaran, K. (1996) Small speeches, subaltern gender: nationalist ideology and its historiography. In Amin, S. and Chakrabarty, D. (eds.) *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society Vol. 9*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Young, I. M. (1997) *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Yuval-Davis, N. and Anthias, F. (1989) *Woman – Nation – State*. London: Macmillan.