Women and Nation: A Discursive Understanding

Critics have forwarded numerous definitions of nationalism and have discussed its many variants. However, literature on nations and nationalism rarely addresses the question of gender, despite the general notion that all nations depend on powerful constructions of gender. As Cynthia Enloe remarks, nationalisms have ‘typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope’ (in McClintock 1993: 62). Many important texts on nationalism sideline the issue of gender (Kedourie 2000; Gellner 1983; Anthony D. Smith 1971). This chapter seeks to examine the significance of gender in the issue of nationalism in general, providing a discursive ground for the emergence of cultural nationalism and its gendered politics (particularly in the Indian context).

The first section gives a general overview of nationalism – its various definitions, its origins etc. and the way colonial India confronted it. The second section deals with women’s exclusion from the public sphere beginning with the French Revolution and explores the ways in which theorists have pointed out the gendered politics of it all. The third section gives a historical evolution of cultural nationalism focusing on its gendered politics. It tries to locate woman’s presence, woman’s agency, and subjectivity in this whole process. Such an examination is required in order to assess the contribution of Assamese women to the emerging nationalist discourse of the colonial period.
Theorists in general would agree to the proposition that nationalism began in the Western world from where it gradually spread to the rest of the world (Kohn: 1017: 1939; Kedourie: 2000: 252). Outside the Western world, in Central and Eastern Europe and in Asia, nationalism followed social and political development: the frontiers of an existing state and of a rising nationality rarely coincided. Nationalism there grew in protest against and in conflict with the existing state pattern – not primarily to transform it into a people’s state, but to redraw the political boundaries in conformity with ethnographic demands. Kohn in “The Idea of Nationalism” discusses nationalism as a state of mind, which at the same time is also an ideological project since the group that adheres to it also seeks to find expression in a sovereign state. “Nationalism is an idea, an idee-force, which fills man’s brain and heart with new thoughts and new sentiments, and drives him to translate his consciousness into deeds of organized action.” (Kohn 1939: 1016) Nationality is not merely about organization and forming a homogenous identity but more importantly, it is a group seeking to find its expression in what it regards as the highest form of organized activity, a sovereign state. The ideals of the French Revolution played an important role in the development of the universal urge for liberty and progress, which in some sense is representative of what nationalism sought to achieve. The French Revolution provided the kind of disruption of local political units plus the unseating of dynastic, aristocratic, and church appeals that began to wed some citizens to a national state and some leaders to the ideas that nation, and not just revolution might be a useful rallying cry.
Kedourie relates the idea of the nation to education insisting that the purpose of the latter is ‘to bend the will of the young to the will of the nation’ (Kedourie 1966: 259). For the European world, nationalism represents the attempt to actualize in political terms the universal urge for liberty and progress (Chatterjee 1999: 2). However, such understandings of the concept lack the phenomenon’s historicity; they are inclined to see nationalism as a monolith, involving essentially the same cultural baggage and mass enthusiasm regardless of time and place (Stearns 1997: 58-59). “Like all complex historical movements, nationalism is not a monolithic phenomenon to be deemed entirely good or entirely bad; nationalism is a contradictory discourse and its internal contradictions need to be unpacked in their historical specificity” (Radhakrishnan 2001: 195). The theory of nationalism has always been complicated by this background, and by the intrusion of nationalist ideology into the theory. There are also national differences in the theory of nationalism, since people define nationalism based on their local experience.

By the end of the nineteenth century, large parts of the non-European world witnessed a grappling with the issue of freedom from a colonial power. This process was accompanied by a process of self-definition, where nation-states that emerged out of anti-colonial struggles debated and constructed a discourse not just around a set of democratic rights, but also around a notion of selfhood and identity. One needs to look at the specific socio-historical conditions in which most of these nationalist movements occur and try to understand these movements as rational attempts made under difficult conditions to pursue the universally accepted ideals of enlightenment and progress. Critics have always tried to establish that
nationalism in whatever way the non-European world adopts it will always remain a prisoner of the prevalent European intellectual fashion. Debates have always centered on the question whether the non-European world was culturally capable of acquiring the standards set by the Enlightenment view of rationality and progress or whether these countries too were involved in the historical task of modernization in their own way, which would make them reach the values that have made the West what it is today.

Both these questions point in the same direction – that nationalism remains an European discourse which if adopted the society/community/nation concerned has to adopt it according to European terms. Partha Chatterjee in his overview of the discourse of nation and nationalism discusses the process of modernization that began in Europe because of Enlightenment, gradually spread to the rest of the world affecting the traditional set up of many non-European societies (Chatterjee 1999: 1-30). In Chatterjee’s view, the problem with nationalism is that it attains and continues the baleful legacies of Eurocentrism and Orientalism. Citing John Plamenatz, Chatterjee points out that the received history of nationalism argues for two kinds: Eastern and Western nationalisms. Western nationalisms are deemed capable of generating their own models of autonomy from within, whereas eastern nationalisms have to assimilate something alien to their own cultures before they can become modern nations.

Thus, in the Western context the ideals of being French, being German or British becomes the basis of a modernity that ‘reroots’ and ‘reconfirms’ a native sense of identity. On the other hand, Eastern nationalisms and in particular ‘third
world’ nationalisms, are forced to choose between “being themselves” and “becoming modern nations”, as though the universal standards of reason and progress were natural and intrinsic to the West (Chatterjee 1999: 1-2). Tradition vs. modernity, religious orthodoxy vs. secularism, ancient India vs. the West, nationalist movement vs. the colonial state, such are the paired oppositional categories through which the history of nationalism has often been narrated. In the case of India, the initial cultural construction began with the process of colonization, which provided European historians with easy access to information in the form of ‘orientalist discourse’. History viewed in this sense becomes a cultural-political project as is evident from the following passage from Lata Mani where she acutely observes how English representations of sati were a nodule of patriarchal-colonial imagination and thereby a form of displaced violence:

Within the discourse on sati, women are represented in two mutually exclusive ways: either as heroines able to withstand the raging blaze of the funeral pyre, or else as pathetic victims coerced against their will into flames. These poles preclude the possibility of a female subjectivity that is shifting, contradictory, inconsistent. Such a constrained and reductive notion of agency discursively positions women as objects to be saved – never as subjects who act, even if within extremely constraining social conditions. This representation of Indian women has been a fertile ground for the elaboration of discourses of salvation, in the context of colonialism, nationalism, and, more recently, Western feminism. For the most part, all three have constructed the Indian woman not as someone who acts, but as someone to be acted upon (Mani 1998: 397).
The political nature of these constructions requires a cultural critique. Elaborating on the importance of the Other to the Western sense of self, history, and culture, Mani argues that “among other things the colony has served as a theater of social experimentation, an imaginary terrain in which to remap European social relations, and the place from which to mount a critique of metropolitan culture” (Mani 1998: 3). The direction of the predicative role of the cultural-moral construction of ‘India’ as a category for ruling can never be underestimated, especially with regard to mediating knowledge relationships between the knower and the known (Bannerji 2001: 26). The empirical fact that colonial history and thus the representation of India were in the main produced by Europeans of a certain political and moral persuasion, at a certain juncture in history, is here combined with an epistemological critique as knowledge produced hence contributing to the creation of a particular ‘India’. This power/knowledge game distorted reality in a manner to give birth to an ‘imagined’, ‘translated’, orientalist ‘India’ which entered into European circulation “both transcendentally as ‘knowledge’ and practically as categories for administration” (Bannerji 2001: 30).

According to David Kopf however, Orientalism is not merely, what Edward Said makes it out to be i.e. an idea, a construct, ‘almost always sinister’. Instead, he considers that it exists in concrete historical reality: as an ideology, a movement, and a set of social institutions:

Orientalism as history exists and has existed outside of Said’s personal conception of it. Historical Orientalism had a concrete reality, was complex, internally diverse, changed over time, and was never monolithic….Let us take the case of India. Not only was modern Orientalism born in Calcutta in 1784, with the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, but Indian cultural policy was conducted from 1772 to 1830 by a civil service elite known historiographically as the British Orientalists (Kopf 1980: 200-01).

Kopf further remarks that the Bengal Renaissance and Indian national awakening would have been inconceivable without the British colonial experience and the project of the British Orientalists, which helped Indians to find an indigenous identity in the modern world. Of course, no one can deny Said’s contention that Orientalism was politically motivated and was an outgrowth of the British colonialist experience. Nevertheless, it was the records gathered by the Oriental scholars, which facilitated the revivalist nationalists to get a systematic overview
of their own past. The exposure to literary education equipped Indian intellectuals with the conviction that their history and belief were capable of co-existing with modern knowledge, which, in turn, can help them to construct a glorious past out of the present and to eulogize this past. Nationalist writers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) who was schooled in the best Western literary establishments in Bengal turned their attention to reviving myths and tales of the past to stir up longings in the people for the return of a golden (may be mythical) age (Vishwanathan 2002: 157). The acquiring of this Romantic imagination was perhaps initially responsible for shaping a unified nationalist sentiment.

Critics have generally argued that the concept of the ‘nation’ was invented or imagined into existence in the nineteenth century even though in the Indian context it has to be noted that ‘Bharatvarsha’ or ‘Hindustan’ has thousands of years of historical tradition. Colonial India is merely a fragment of this long tradition and a study of colonial India is insufficient to come to any conclusion regarding the beginnings of nationalism in India. Benedict Anderson’s print capitalism and determination of nationalism through language fixes a Western pattern of ‘one language, one nation’ that cannot be an acceptable model for a country like India with diverse language communities and cultural traditions. C.A Bayly in his study of the beginnings of nationalism in South Asia traces an entire lineage of what he calls ‘regional patriotism’ in India. Bayly mentions the Ranas of Mewar, the phenomenon of bhumidar (commitment to and defense of one’s own territory; a sentiment broader than feudal loyalty) in the small segmented kingdoms of central
India; Rajputs who were able to create a distinct sense of local identity even before the appearance of the British; the Jats whose was the case of territorial patriotism like the Maharashtrians, Telegu ‘ethnicity’ which emerged in the Southern Deccan between 1400 and 1600 and fortified by years of conflict with the Muslim Other (here there is a distinct reference to the Mysore Sultans, Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan) (Bayly 1998: 17). It is evident that in pre-colonial India, identities, and doctrines wider than the social divisions of village cluster, clan, and community were continuously forming and reforming. It is interesting to see how nationalism existed and grew out of the fragments of the pre-colonial Indian society. Instead of merely seeing/analyzing Indians as second class nationalists or blind devotees of the Western nation-state, a proposition which denies Indians agency in their own history it would be useful to read through the nationalist discourse as being both adopted and invented in nature to suit the geographical location of India.

Bruce T. McCully in his essay on “The Origins of Nationalism in India according to Native Writers” classifies historical writings into three categories. The first classification is of writings, which seek to associate the origins of Indian nationalism in terms of native institutions, the roots of which long antedate, the establishment of British rule. In the second classification are writings that recognize that modern Indian nationalism has arisen largely because of influences that were introduced into India through the contact with Great Britain. The third classification is comprised of writings that indicate consciously or unconsciously some recognition of British influences, but which regard such influences as baneful, deleterious, and unfavorable to the people and civilization of India.
Belonging to the first category are writings of Radhakumud Mookerjee, according to whom the foundations of Indian nationality were laid in the earliest period of its history when the people came into possession of a fixed territory, which they gradually came to look upon as their common motherland. Bipin Chandra Pal in a similar note speaks with enthusiasm of the cultural unity of India derived from Aryan times when the principle of federalism and the federal type of nationality (in contrast to the European concept of territorial nationality) grew up in association with the title ‘Bharatvarsha’\textsuperscript{6}. Also belonging to this category are writings of Sankaran Nair and Sudhindra Bose who argue that ancient India was not a stranger to democratic institutions. According to them, the spirit of popular governments never died out during the subsequent centuries, but rather survived in the Indian village communities. These various attempts to interpret the unity of ancient India in terms of religion and culture (aside from the improbability of this theory in the light of historical research), appears to be more in the nature of a rationalization to support the contention that India has always possessed some of the component elements of nationality than an explanation of the origins of nationalism (McCully 1935: 295-314). This ‘story-telling’ about a collective self represents an important contribution to the making of a nationalist mentality, an act of imagining, of conceiving things narratively in radically different way, thereby forming the narrative mould of a powerful sentiment (Kaviraj 1994: 320). For Anthony D Smith, the rise of nations is predicated on the prior existence of ethnic groups, and nations are formed around ‘ethnic cores’ developed from premodern ‘ethnie’ whose members possess a collective myth of common ancestry, possess one or more differentiating elements of a common culture, share historical memories,
associate themselves with a specific ‘homeland’ and have a sense of solidarity for significant sections of the population (in Spencer and Wollman 2002: 67). This understanding suggests that the concept of the nation refers to a particular kind of social and cultural community, a territorial community of shared history and culture.

In case of India, we confront an interesting situation where the colonial state leads to anti colonial and thereby pro-nationalist thinking. C.A. Bayly argues that Indian nationalism:

was widely rooted in society and moulded by ideologies, political norms, and social organizations, which derived from a deeper indigenous inheritance. That inheritance, of course, had itself been modified by several hundred years of contact with the wider world, but it was not in origin or spirit a product of European bourgeois discourse or political organization. This inheritance, again, was particularly vital in the Indian regions, though it was also drawn on in the creation of the wider concept of Indian civilization and polity (Bayly 1998: 102).

Rise of nationalist fervour, however, is not free from the links of the old patriotisms that existed in various parts of the Indian subcontinent before the formation of the colonial government. After all, it is the colonial government and its racist policies, which paved the way for the formation of a centralized national government in spite of the British efforts to highlight and emphasize upon fragments (may it be the caste, the regional, or religious community and the rustic dialect). Glorification of the land and people itself was deeply rooted in the thought and literature of the subcontinent. The land was generally represented as female
which was evoked by early nationalists who, in order to provide a strong resistance to the colonial government looked back at the glorious Indian past thereby giving the past an active role in the present. Nationalism even though regarded by many thinkers as being a modernist enterprise does not really adhere to modernist principles when it comes to India. Pre-colonial histories and annals are also full of stories of the heroic defense of homelands by nobles and people who die in defense of territories, so endowing them with stronger charisma. In the classic case of Rajasthan, unity of the Rajputs and the notion of sanctified land were mutually supporting. No less admirable are the examples of Rajput women who preferred to burn themselves rather than fall into the hands of foreign invaders in order to protect their honour (which was also the honour of their clan or community, which needed to be kept pure even at the cost of one’s life).

There was an ambivalence in the nature of thought which included both imitation/adoption/acceptance and denial/avoidance/rejection: initial imitation of the Western, modern individual and manners followed by rejection; initial rejection of ancestral ways which are seen as obstacles to progress followed by the need to cherish and preserve those very traditions as marks of identity. Why does ‘tradition’ become such an important issue? Asking this question is important to appreciate and examine the tendency of going back to one’s own past, which is characteristic of the revivalist nationalist thinking of the late nineteenth century. The base for colonialism in India was not built through war but on the moral pretext of helping India improve. Given that colonialism is morally justified, there was a need to make a counter moral claim, to show that India had its own
civilization, its own glorious past. In this context, Partha Chatterjee identifies two chief proponents of culture – its material aspect and its spiritual aspect. In this division, lay the nationalist resolution of the colonial enterprise.

An attempt was made to highlight and project the ‘undominated’ spiritual aspect of culture from where precisely the resistance had to begin. As Partha Chatterjee in discussing Bankim’s contribution to nationalism in its ‘moment of departure’ notes:

The superiority of the West was in the materiality of its culture. The West had achieved progress, prosperity, and freedom because it had placed Reason at the heart of its culture. The distinctive culture of the West was its science, its technology, and its love of progress. However, culture did not consist only of the material aspect of life. There was the spiritual aspect too, and here the European Enlightenment had little to contribute. In the spiritual aspect of culture, the East was superior – hence, undominated. (Chatterjee 1999: 66)

Partha Chatterjee further notes how Bankim “became an unsparing opponent of the principal form of elite-nationalist politics of his times, viz. social reform through the medium of the legislative institutions of the colonial state” which was “founded on a superiority of force” (Chatterjee 1999: 73). Its raison d’être lay in the maintenance and extension of British imperial power – a kind of superiority that Indian society needed to match and overcome. In order to do this, Indian society would have to undergo a transformation in the form of ‘regeneration’ (and not
merely ‘reformation’) of national culture where both material and spiritual values will be combined. By denying the need for ‘reform’, Bankim rejects the colonial assumption that the Oriental/Indian/Hindu is non-autonomous, passive, historically non-active, projecting an alternate doctrine of power where the colonized stands in a better position to resist being powerless. Through his insistence on the need of a national culture supported by a national religion, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee made a compelling argument even in the literature of the times. Satyajit Ray’s film Charulata, based on Tagore’s novella Nastanirh (The Broken Nest) begins with a scene in which Charulata is seen searching for a book on the bookshelf singing ‘Bankim’ ‘Bankim’ under her breath. It speaks volumes of the influence of Bankim on later generation nationalists, for his deeply reactive responses to colonialism in spite of having, at the same time, a genuine place for the West within Indian civilization (Dasgupta 2007: 103). His insistence on a ‘national religion’ can be regarded as one way of constructing the nation which focuses on a national identity of the Hindus thereby treating the Muslims as invaders and preventing their assimilation in the nationalist movement. He wrote Anandamath, a story set in eighteenth century India that concerns a sanyasin revolt against the British backed Muslim rule. Yet, their ‘Bande Mataram’ hymn (accompanied by a violent masculine project) is addressed to a nurturing bounteous motherland. In this work, his desire to develop the literature of Bengal and to induce amongst Indians a nationalist consciousness finds expression.

Literature played a very significant role not only in spreading nationalist sentiments but also in capturing the complexities of the age. Rabindranath
Tagore’s political novels like *Gora* (1910), *Ghare Baire* (1916), and *Char Adhyay* (1934) through the contesting ideologies of individual characters depicts a densely textured and webbed social context – something that is representative of the changing priorities and shifting ideologies in the author’s own life. For example, in 1905, during the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, Tagore joined other nationalists in condemning Lord Curzon’s imperialist policies and applauded the burning of English goods on the streets of Calcutta. However, exactly two years later, in his most powerful novel *Gora*, he deplored nationalism and imperialism as two heads of the same monster created by the modern West (Kopf 2000: 197). Gora, the anti-western Hindu nationalist hero of the novel gradually realizes that religion, instead of being the sustaining faith that he had perceived it to be, had become reduced to stifling rituals and divisive practices. By delinking Hinduism from his concept of ‘Bharatvarsha’ (which happens after he incidentally comes to know of his Irish parentage), Gora thus becomes representative of Tagore’s own evolving relationship with Indian nationalism. A true Indian needs to be wrenched out of his sectarian identifications:

Today I am Bharatiya. Within me there is no conflict between communities, whether Hindu or Muslim or Krishtan. Today all the castes of Bharat are my caste; whatever everybody eats is my food. I must tell you that I have visited many districts of Bengal, have accepted hospitality from the lowest caste of villagers – don’t think I have merely given lectures before city audiences – but I never could really become one of them (Tagore 1997: 475).
Of course, Gora’s ultimate transformation to a Brahmo that he had resisted so long also is indicative of Tagore, himself a Brahmo, increasingly wishing to accept the wider identity of universal humanism. Tagore while acknowledging the problems within Indian society does not embrace the West as an alternative. He simultaneously attempts to negotiate both the critique of modern nationalism and the virtues of native societies, along with highlighting the difficulties in native societies. Two instances from Tagore’s *Nationalism*, drives home the point that has just been made. The first is from the section ‘Nationalism in India’ where he discusses the problems in the Indian political and social order and its difference from the West in order to further prove that the Western idea of nationhood along with additional evil of commercialism are not welcome to ‘our Indian life’ (Tagore 1950: 129):

> Once again, I draw your attention to the difficulties India has had to encounter and her struggle to overcome them. Her problem was the problem of the world in miniature. India is too vast in its area and too diverse in its races. It is many countries packed in one geographical receptacle. It is just the opposite of what Europe truly is, namely, one country made into many. Thus, Europe in its culture and growth has had the advantage of the strength of the many as well as the strength of the one. India, on the contrary, being naturally many, yet adventitiously one, has all along suffered from the looseness of its diversity and the feebleness of its unity (Tagore 1950: 114).

The second is from the section ‘Nationalism in the West’ where he criticizes the very idea of the ‘nation’, which he regards as originally a Western idea. Yet he
admits that the ‘spirit of the West’ and not the ‘nation of the West’ has made it possible for these people (that is people of different races and customs) to come ‘in closer touch with one another and cultivate a communion of aspiration’:

We must admit that during the personal government of the former days there have been instances of tyranny, injustice, and extortion. They caused sufferings and unrest from which we are glad to be rescued. The protection of the law is not only a boon, but it is a valuable lesson to us. It is teaching us the discipline, which is necessary for the stability of civilization and from the continuity of progress. We are realizing through it that there is a universalizing standard of justice to which all men, irrespective of their caste and colour, have their equal claim (Tagore 1950: 18-19).

Both these passages exemplify the simultaneous critique of colonialism/modernity while also focusing on the internal evils within Indian society, which becomes one of the unique combinations as well as strategies of the Gandhian political programme (Raghuramaraju 2006: 20). The universalism that Tagore partly advocates can be read as another way of constructing the nation indicating a different phase that does not play on the anti-Muslim phase of Bankim Chandra’s fiction. A proper nationalist consciousness is one that is beyond geographical, regional, racial, and communal distinctions. The nation in this phase is literally a construction, an ‘imagined community’ that insists on collectivity. In constituting this community, however history (along with literature) in its popular form, as an irreducible mixture of facts and fantasy plays a crucial role. There appears a necessary inversion in nationalist historical discourse: ordinary popular
consciousness regards this search for history as ‘a search for the past’ narrative of a community, which might be able to determine the being of a nation. In this scheme of things, women function as symbolic border guards and as embodiments of a collectivity and, therefore, its cultural producers. However, she is not given an active role and not seen as a part of the nation-in-formation or as a citizen-to-be. In the early twentieth century Assam, the image of Joymati was evoked as a woman who sacrificed her life for her husband and her country. Women were urged to inculcate the virtues of Joymati for the benefit of the Assamese community.

II

Virginia Woolf’s chant in *Three Guineas* – “As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country…” (in Walder 2008: 201) – haunts every woman who bothers to think about ‘woman and nation’. It is difficult to decipher whether Woolf’s elated disenfranchisement of herself springs from defiance or defeat; however, it raises the all-important question – where is the ‘woman’ in the project of nationalism and the nation-state. Woolf’s own dissociation with war and violence which she regards as “a sex instinct which she cannot share” (in Walder: 2008: 201) hints at the kind of gendered nature of nationalism from which females have very little to gain. Elleke Boehmer, too, in one of her essays notes that the ‘motherland’ of male nationalism may ‘not signify’ “home” and “source” to women. Unlike men, women appear in a ‘metaphoric or symbolic role’ (in Mcclintock 1993: 62).
The starting point for many feminist analyses of politics, nation, citizenship, has been the fact that women have been excluded from the exercise of political power. For long periods of history, women were denied the vote in Western democracies, and women are still dramatically underrepresented in formal political institutions and decision-making bodies worldwide. Feminists have traced women’s political exclusion to the very roots of Western political theories and institutions, analyzing the ways in which Western democratic institutions have historically excluded women from access to full political citizenship and political power. The Renaissance did not guarantee women liberty or equality. In the great transition from medieval feudal society to the early modern state, during the Renaissance, family and political life were restructured because of which ‘women suffered new constraints’. Writings on education, domestic life, and society have been identified which sharply distinguishes ‘an inferior domestic realm’ from the ‘superior public realm of men’ (Kelly 1984: 21). The ‘genesis of the bourgeois public sphere’ which Habermas regards as an idealization of actual historical processes is the result of the new social order that was taking shape along with the apparatus of the modern state (Habermas: 85,89). However, criticisms have been made against the very principle of universal access, which the bourgeois public sphere regards as its base. John Thompson writes in this regard:

In practice, it [public sphere] was restricted to those individuals who had the education and the financial means to participate in it. What does not emerge very clearly from Habermas’ account, however, is the extent to which the bourgeois
public sphere was not only restricted to educated and propertied elites, but also a predominantly male reserve (Thompson 1995: 72).

Feminist theory critiques an understanding of politics that holds on to a separation of the two spheres, assigns gender-specific connotations to them, and by implication orders them hierarchically. By being assigned to the private sphere—so claims the analysis—women's lives and work are, to a large degree, made invisible, while their experiences, interests, forms of organization, and action are excluded as not worthy of attention.

The exclusion of women from the bourgeois public sphere is attributed primarily to the structural transformation that the public sphere underwent during the French Revolution and is to be considered as being central to its incarnation⁶. The French Revolution may be considered as a major inspiration behind political change throughout Europe resulting in the rise of the modern nation-state. According to Glenda Sluga a characteristic of “that nation-state was the firmer delineation of gender boundaries, which coincided with the simultaneous rise of the bourgeois public sphere and the privileging of the patriarchal household as the microcosm for the social, economic, and political order” (Sluga 2000: 1548). The family as the microcosm of the society was the training ground for the cultivation of familial interests, which could assure patriotism, loyalty to a larger community and maintenance of social order. Women’s exclusion was increasingly premised on the identification of ‘femininity’ with the private sphere (Sluga 2000: 1546). By turning to the family, political philosophers, as well as governments established the foundations of separate spheres for male and female citizenship within the nation.
Mazzini’s formulations of national identity and nation-states emphasized the symbolic importance of women as ‘Woman’, and asserted the national significance of their reproductive role (in Sluga 2000: 1554). The French Revolution demanded patriotism from the man who was also in other terms the citizen-soldier. However, no such demand was made of the woman who could take up patriotism as a noble mission on the basis of her distinctively feminine contribution – as only a patriot mother could bring up patriot children. Despite the possibilities ascribed to women through their patriotism, nationality reaffirmed citizenship as a male prerogative banning women from participation in revolutionary clubs and excluding them from the public political realm.

The writers of the Enlightenment most often took a traditional stance on "the woman question"; they viewed women as biologically and therefore socially different from men, destined to play domestic roles inside the family rather than public, political ones. Among the many writers of the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau published the most influential works on the subject of women's role in society. His novel Emile revolves around the ideal kind of education for a man who was to be the future citizen of the nation. For Rousseau, the father’s place in the family was affirmed and consolidated by his public role in relation to the state and woman’s domestic and national role was confined to that of the patriot’s wife and mother of citizens. Rousseau believed that men would be citizens not because of laws that command it but on a basis of shared love for the whole: this feeling is not natural to men it is artificial. Rousseau believed, and wanted to educate/civilize us to believe that civic love is literally ingested at a mother's breast, which he
proclaims the initial source of social sentiments and the necessary link between the institution of the family (the first and only natural institution), and the state. Rousseau thus shrewdly identified and designated woman as the agent of social change in the modern era. Invoking women's functions as mothers, Rousseau explains the inequality between the sexes that emerged with fixed dwellings, by claiming, “this inequality is not a human institution-or, at least, it is the work not of prejudice but of reason” (Rousseau). The inequality between men and women is most assuredly a human, civil institution. Rousseau, who had eloquently decried man-made, institutionally maintained inequality, justifies it in the case of women based on reason: a rationalization not admitted in the inequality that is found between men.

Sylvia Walby while investigating the relationship between feminism and nationalism concludes that gender cannot be analyzed outside of ethnic, national, and race relations and vice versa (Walby 1996: 252). She identifies the definition of the ‘national project’ as a problem while trying to recast the theorization of ‘nation-formation’:

There is a struggle to define what constitutes the national project, and women are, typically, heard less than men in this. Thus, gender relations are important in determining what constituted as the national project. Where the national project includes women’s interests, then women are more likely to support it (Walby 1996: 245).
Differentiating between Western feminism and Third world feminism she agrees with Kumari Jayawardena that feminism is generated by local conditions. According to the latter, women’s emancipation movements were:

acted out against a backdrop of nationalist struggles aimed at achieving political independence, asserting a national identity, and modernizing society (Jayawardena 1986: 3).

In most cases of anti-colonial movements, male elites sometimes back ‘women’s rights’ as signifier of modernization. However, such histories show that women can be simultaneously actor and hostage to nationalism. Even in many liberatory national movements, women are driven to a double militancy, organizing ‘in and against’ the movement to give a contrary spin to its prevailing gender relations (Cockburn: 1998: 42). For many Third World feminists who fight for national independence, however, the allegiance to nationalism is fraught with more self-doubt and tentativeness. On the one hand, feminists share the goal of national independence with male nationalists who have the tendency to postpone feminist issues until after the attainment of the common goal; while feminists are encouraged to join nationalist movements, they are expected to accept the traditional division of labor. On the other hand, if feminists attempt to raise feminist issues and to develop programs meant to bring structural change in gender relations, they are faced with the solemn admonition that “now is not the time” and the accusation, both by men and women, that they generate division and disunity in the nationalist struggle (as cited in Herr: 2003: 141-142). Despite this dilemma,
Third World feminists in colonized nations seem to concur that national independence is one of their most urgent goals.

Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis argues that

Women’s link to the state is complex. On the one hand they are acted upon as members of collectivities, institutions or groupings….On the other hand, they are a special focus of state concerns as a social category with a specific role (particularly human reproduction) (Anthias and Davis 2000: 1480).

Women are to be regarded as ‘cultural carriers’ transmitting the rich heritage of ethnic symbols and ways of life to the other members of the ethnic group (Anthias and Yuval Davis 2000: 1480). Hans Kohn subdivides nationalism into ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’, the first civic in character, seeking realization in a sovereign state, and the second ethnic which seeks to defend the unique culture of the community (Kohn 1944) - a model which has been modified and developed by many writers including Partha Chatterjee for India. Women thus acquire actual symbolic figuration. The nation as a loved woman in danger, or as a mother who has lost her sons in battle, is a frequent part of the particular nationalist discourse in nationalist struggles or other forms of national conflicts when men are called to fight ‘for the sake of our women and children’ or ‘to defend their honour’ (Anthias and Yuval Davis 2000: 1483).

Women have participated in nationalist liberation struggles in various ways. Among all the different supportive and nurturing roles assumed by women as participants in the nationalist discourse, Nira Yuval-Davis focuses on women’s
The sexual division of labour within the military has often been even more formalized and rigid than that in the civil sector. This is important, because there have often been even arguments, both by feminists and by those who opposed them, that the entry of women into the military is the precondition for women’s achievement of full citizenship rights (Yuval-Davis 2000: 1571).

A fine example of women’s participation in warfare is the the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, the all-female brigade of the Indian National Army (INA) under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose which fought a jungle war for India’s freedom and which stands as an excellent testimony to Netaji’s ideal of equality between men and women. For Bose, the mobilization of powerful women, whose models were rooted in Indian mythology and history was a prerequisite for national liberation (Hills and Silverman 1993: 742). The complementarities of these ancient images with elements of Bose’s personal psychological development motivated him to devote his life to the nationalist cause and wedded the attainment of that goal with the direct involvement of Indian women. By transmitting the ideals of traditional Indian sources, and his personal longings for a powerful Indian mother figure, Bose tapped into the collective psyche of Indian women in a powerful merging of historical consciousness, feminist initiative, and nationalistic fervor. The warrior Rani as a freedom fighter provided a legitimate alternative to the Gandhian non-violent mainstream as represented by Sita, the submissive female ideal. In choosing the Rani as a symbol, Bose was able to wed strains of
nationalism to imagery of powerful, effective women assuming roles of active leadership and responsibility (Hills and Silverman 1993: 744).

However, leaving aside a few individual instances it is to be generally regarded that elements of national identity and cultural difference are articulated as forms of control over women and their sexuality, which infringe upon their rights as enfranchised citizens. In Europe, however, liberatory feminist moments in national movements have been rare. Yuval-Davis and others have shown how the discourses and policies of nationalist regimes position and exploit women in relation to reproduction, in a double sense of the word. No one can possibly overlook the woman-centered symbols, which become the spirit of the nation – Britannia, Liberty, Bharatmata among others. Though she may look strong up there in the nationalist imagery, this woman was not autonomous (Cockburn 1998: 43). Matters took a different shape when women discarded their symbolic relation to the nation and firmly asserted their strong ‘presence’ not only in the inner sphere of the ‘home’ but also in the ‘world’ outside. This involves women becoming ‘actors’ and not merely ‘hostages’ of the nationalist discourse.

Elleke Boehmer suggests that nationalism should be rethought and reworked to be more “feminising” and “woman-centred” which would be a variant of the andro-centric nationalist discourse (Boehmer 2005: 207). Rokeya Sakhwat Hussain, in her book *Sultana’s Dream* envisions the nation as “Ladyland”, a technologically advanced world where women exchange their original roles with men – men stay inside the zenana and women are outside in the streets. She relies on the literary tool of fantasy to subvert dominant discourses and reach women’s
true “home,” a utopia in which women control their own lives. Thus while novels like Rabindranath Tagore’s *Home and the World* reveal that “the home was not a complementary but rather the original site on which the hegemonic project of nationalism was launched.” *Sultana’s Dream* transforms the feminized site of the home into the very nation itself. This is very different from the way it is constructed in the exclusionary discourse of nation-formation as the women’s sphere. The home becomes the outside world and, ironically therefore, precisely where women belong. Rokeya thus rejects the characterization of the high-class Hindu/Muslim woman as the female subject necessary for the survival of a patriarchal modern nation-state. Of course, Rokeya’s utopian dream of an alternate feminist modernity is too fantastic to be true. However, it definitely points to the various ways in which the first generation of women writers in India conceived of nation and women’s role and position within it.

III

As an Indian bourgeois society developed under Western domination, this class sought to reform itself, initiating campaigns against caste, polytheism, idolatry, animism, purdah, child-marriage, sati, and more, seeing them as elements of a pre-modern or primitive identity. Rammohun Roy’s letter to the ‘India Gazette’ on the Suttee question in the name of Hariharnanda Tirthasvami, (27 March 1819) is representative of what the social reform movement of the nineteenth century wanted to achieve for women in India:

Without wishing to stand forward either as the advocate or opponent of the concremation of widows with the bodies of their deceased Husbands, but ranking
myself among Brahmuns who consider themselves bound by their birth, to obey
the ordinances and maintain the correct observance of Hindoo law, I deem it
proper to call the attention of the public to a point of great importance now at issue
amongst the followers of that law, and upon the determination of which, the lives

The key words and phrases here are ‘Brahmun’ and ‘correct observance of Hindoo
law’. In the rest of the letter, Roy refers to his own tract on Sati (1818) where he
had argued that according to the Hindu law it is the incumbent duty of Hindu
widows to live as ascetics. It is evident that the focus is on rationality, logic, and a
re-reading of scriptures to establish what is right and what is wrong. The
nineteenth century being a highly formative period in the history of modern India,
we find a predominance of middle class male activism where the woman was
supposed to be the passive beneficiary. Roy’s insistence on the observance of
Hindu law rather than the individual women concerned, proves that the entire
‘woman’s question’ in nineteenth century Bengal was part of a larger scheme of
things – the development of a reformed Indian society as a result of the European
encounter. The women around whose lives the debates concerning sati revolved
were neither subjects nor even the primary objects of concern in the debate on its
prohibitions. Lata Mani argues that they were rather the ground for a complex and
competing set of struggles over Hindu society and definitions of Hindu tradition.
Questioning the basic grounds of social reforms, she argues that in different ways
women and Brahmanic scripture became interlocking grounds for the
rearticulation/reconstitution of tradition under colonial rule in various parts of
India (Mani 1998). The movement for women’s education was one such issue
which was campaigned for by various groups for different reasons; one of the reasons being the necessity for the rising middle class to reform the ‘home’ and to bring it into complementarity with the new world outside. By the 1860’s there was a wide range of opinion on why women should be educated and what their education should consist of. The social reform movement not only concentrated on reforms for women but also took up other social issues such as the Brahmanic regulation of the society. Another issue that raised a lot of controversy among the reformists and revivalists was the raising of the age of consent. The Aryan version of the Orientalist Hindu golden age, which governed the principles of the revivalists, did not allow them to advocate anything that might bring about degeneration of the race. As women formed the ‘core’ of the race they were to be specially protected from any sort of ‘outside’ intervention. In the broad context of aggressive cultural nationalism, which valorized select features of a Hindu past, a ‘national’ identity of women was required for which the model of Vedic woman of the past who were excellent helpmates to their male counterparts, was considered appropriate.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in *Anandamath* created another powerful image of womanhood, which required women to sublimate their sexuality in order to offer selfless sacrifices required for the liberation of the ravaged motherland. Shanti in *Anandamath* transcends both her sexuality and domesticity in order to offer her services for a nation in crisis. Dayananda Saraswati prescribed another important role for women, which was motherhood as the ‘sole rationale of a woman’s existence’. He insisted on offering women proper knowledge of
procreation and rearing so that the progeny would be of a superior order. What we find is that the much debated ‘woman’s question’ reached a moment of silence and came to be contained within the discourse of nationalism as a strategy for contesting colonial hegemony, revealing the gendered inception of Indian nationalist ideology. In addition, to be noted is the fact that the focus from the days of Rammohan Roy onwards was on the high caste Hindu woman allowing the formation of a particular kind of womanhood under the agenda of nationalism thereby excluding various sections from its ambit.

In the discourse that was generated between the struggle for freedom on the one hand and the struggle for one’s own identity, the women’s issue of acquiring a liberal status separate from the demands of the community seemed to have lost its urgency as well as its relevance. In her influential and controversial essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak had made the famous statement: the subaltern cannot speak (Spivak 2006: 32). The lament arose from her realization that the subaltern in general and the “historically muted subject of the subaltern woman” in particular, was inevitably consigned to being either misunderstood or misrepresented through the self-interest of those with the power to represent. Her various meditations on the female subaltern have spawned a series of critiques and responses that raise certain central questions in any discussion of feminism and post colonialism: “Who can speak and for whom? Who listens?” These are key questions, which leads us to doubt the motives of the nineteenth century social reform movement in India, which claimed to have worked towards the progress of women. Spivak has famously described British
intervention in the Sati practice in India as “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak 2006: 33). Partha Chatterjee explains that the colonizers were thus able to “transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country. In this case, the British as well as Indian men who claimed to be progressive spoke on behalf of the woman. In addition, women came to be literally misrepresented. On the one hand, reformers tried to impose education on women whom they required as companions. On the other hand, the birth of the nationalist consciousness made a section of the male community to impose the image of Sati, Savitri, and Damayanti, on women in general. Women thereby came to be symbolized as female energy, which constituted the motherland (Bharatmata) during the anti-colonial nationalist struggle thereby articulating a significant role for women in the nation building and decolonization process. However, even this image of womanhood remained strictly restricted to upper caste Hindu women excluding low caste Hindu women and women from other religions. As Uma Chakravarty observes, ‘vast sections of women did not exist for the nineteenth century nationalists’ (Chakravarty 1999: 79).

An interesting text that addresses the question of women’s role in the nationalist enterprise is Rabindranath Tagore’s Ghare Baire translated as Home and the World. The novel's plot turns on Nikhil's wife, Bimala, leaving the seclusion of the zenana (women's quarters) for the first time to enter the public space of her husband's drawing room in order to meet his friend Sandip. Bimala's first step, a formidable one for the daughter-in-law of an aristocratic Hindu
household, gestures toward an important moment of social change. Reformed and refined under the patriarchal authority of her modern, enlightened husband, the Bimala of Nikhil’s construction should enter the public sphere without jeopardizing the intrinsic values of the private. Ideally, the moment should signal the perfect synthesis of tradition and modernity, the narrative trope for a reformed social order. However, Bimala fails this test. Her growing attraction for Sandip and her longing for his sense of freedom precipitate disorder; significantly, the consequent destruction of "home" is also the collapse of a nationalist social order in the specter of communal violence with which the book ends (Azim 2002: 396-97). Because the ‘home’ is that very sacred space from where the new and independent nation would emerge. Bimala desires freedom – freedom, perhaps to make an individual journey and become one with the new horizon she gazes at everyday through her open window.

The notion of freedom itself is perhaps enough to open up a completely new horizon, where different constituencies clamoring for this democratic principle will force emerging nation states to listen to different voices. Women’s demand for freedom is highly significant in this context, linked as it is with the special space women are given within the discourse of independence and the formation of the nation-state (Azim 2002: 397). “To be free, to be modern, and to develop is to get out of a situation of confinement. The modern West’s understanding of liberty relies upon a narrative of mobility, of openness and dynamism” (Pritchard 2000: 49). Even before Kant, at the threshold of the Enlightenment, Thomas Hobbes wrote, “Liberty, that we may define it, is nothing
else but an absence of the lets and hindrances of motion. . . . [E]very man hath more or less liberty, as he hath more or less space in which he employs himself. . . . [T]he more ways a man may move himself, the more liberty he hath” (in Pritchard 2000: 49)

Partha Chatterjee's persuasive analysis in "Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question" shows "home" and "world" to be symbolically cathedcted spaces in the discourse of nationalism. According to Chatterjee, nationalism reconciled the contrary pulls of tradition and modernity through a discursive separation of culture into the opposing realms of the material and the spiritual. In the nationalist mind, so Chatterjee argues, the East had been subjugated by the superior material culture of the West-its technological advancement, its economic institutions founded on post-Enlightenment rational thought, its modern statecraft. In the material encounter, the culture of the natives had proved inferior and in need of modernizing reforms. However, nationalism believed that in the other domain - that of the spirit - the essential identity of the East was manifest, and in its long spiritual tradition, the culture of the Indian people was undoubtedly preeminent. Thus, Chatterjee concludes, nationalism constructed an ideological frame, which allowed for selective borrowing from the West while retaining a space for its autonomous subjectivity (Chatterjee 2004: 238).

The material/spiritual opposition can easily be pressed into the analogous categories of inner and outer, private and public, home and world; therefore, if the "world" was where the native people had been humbled in the colonial encounter, Chatterjee claims that the "home" became the symbolic locus of an unconquered
and uncompromised national identity. Given that the "home," the last citadel of traditional values was also the sphere of woman, Chatterjee's argument indicates that the discourse of nationalism was also inevitably a gendered one:

The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents our inner spiritual self, our identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world—and woman is its representation. (Chatterjee 2004: 238-239)

One may conclude following Chatterjee that through a series of transferences, the whole cultural edifice of the nation came to rest first in the ‘home’, and then on the physical person of ‘woman’. “The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honour of a new social responsibility, and by associating the task of ‘female emancipation’ with the historical good of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination” (Chatterjee 2004: 248). In fact, Tanika Sarkar contends that in nationalist iconography of nineteenth-century Bengal woman became “the sign of the last inviolate space, the figure of national liberation”:

The woman's body was the ultimate site of virtue, of stability, the last refuge of freedom. . . . Through a steady process of regression, this independent self-hood had been folded back from the public domain to the interior space of the household, and then further pushed back into the hidden depths of an inviolate, chaste, pure female body. (Sarkar 2001: 265)
The equation of national integrity and female chastity resulted in an obsessive preoccupation with "the signs of the final surrender, the fatal invasion of that sacred space" (Sarkar 2001: 266). One may be justified in concluding, therefore, that nationalism produced a discourse of gender that was ultimately repressive for women; however, the terms of nationalist ideologies are at best complex and ambivalent.

In the fight against the enemy from the outside, something within gets even more repressed, and “woman” becomes the mute but necessary allegorical ground for the transactions of nationalist history (Radhakrishnan 2001: 198). The Gandhian intervention in the Indian political scene with the advent of the twentieth century derived chiefly from the idea that along with the new intelligentsia, and the emergent Indian bourgeoisie, the subaltern groups including the vast masses of the peasantry needed to be roped in, in order to provide an adequate challenge to colonial rule. He tried to unite two kinds of resistance in India during those times – 1.) Elite dissatisfaction, which had little popular support and, 2.) Popular defiance which was usually restricted to small regions – in order to attain social depth and intensity which could not be easily suppressed or ignored by the colonial order. Gandhi’s own acts of defiance, which derived from his philosophy of ‘passive resistance’ in the form of Satyagraha, were something that the colonial state had never experienced. Passive resistance, according to Gandhi, is a method of securing rights by personal suffering. The colonial state could not let his behavior go unpunished as it might provoke similar defiance from the mass yet the non-violent meekness with which he accepted legal penalties made it difficult to
prescribe harsh punishments. The colonial administration required both the support of Indian subjects as well as the public opinion in their home country. Thereby, Gandhi gradually became a mass leader. For the modernist intelligentsia he was a shrewd lawyer who knew when and where to play the game and for the ordinary Indian peasants he appeared as ‘a Mahatma or gratuitous redeemer of the world’s suffering who had no earthly personal reason to enter this contest, but who had the courage, precisely the mark of the saint, to take the sufferings of ordinary mankind upon himself, and to suffer the indignities of others.’(Kaviraj 1995: 323) Gandhi regarded the satyagrahi as one who has to lead an exemplary life, to set examples to others by his/her actions without imposing those actions on anybody thereby doing away with criticism, contempt, hostility and eventual violence. If others do not follow their actions, they will be disappointed. In Gandhian terms, the satyagrahis need to regard this disappointment as partly being their own fault and mend their ways by inventing other means of setting an example (Bilgrami 2003: 4162). Thus, passive resistance being the reverse of resistance by arms posed sufficient challenge for the British whose mental attitude is tuned to understand the language of war, violence, and disruption.

Thereby Gandhi negates violence and regards nurturing (primarily a womanly feature) as a principle that is far more important. His strong attachment to the charkha or the spinning wheel, the use of which would make India self-sufficient is also related to the idea of nurture, touch, and craft based ideal of work as against the machine-based one. This is also an aspect of the epistemological transformation between male and female
ways of doing work or thinking about themselves looking at the work. Through this, Gandhi gives public visibility to all those qualities that have always been regarded as ‘feminine’. This image of the satyagrahi and the symbol of the spinning wheel are closely connected to the concept of sisterhood propounded by Gandhi. He urged women to organize and form communities, which will in turn contribute to the strengthening of the national civil society that Gandhi was trying to form through his ‘constructive programme’ that he chiefly advocated in the Belgaum Conference in 1924. His constructive programme included his fasts for specific reasons (a powerful means by which he could pose as an exemplar within public visibility), suspension of all boycotts except the foreign cloth boycott etc. The emerging civil society grew because of the European encounter followed by a modernizing process but there is an equally strong necessity to preserve indigenous Indian society from an out and out influence of modern civilization as it emerged in the West. In *Hind Swaraj* (1908), Gandhi attacks the very notions of modernity and progress and subverts the central claim made on behalf of those notions, namely their correspondence with a new organization of society in which the productive capacities of human labour are multiplied several times, creating increased wealth. Gandhi understood very clearly that ever-increased mechanization and heavy industrialization would disrupt the existing harmony of an agrarian society like India. He believed firmly that women had the capacity to participate in an agrarian community with a village like set-up. With her capacity to take care of the domestic front and equipped
with new ideals of education and learning, women would contribute in the
transformation of the contemporary civil-public space into a non-modern
one, which would preserve the purity of the Indian civilization.

However, in a significant way, there is a sense of continuity in Gandhian
ideas of women and those formulated by the reformers of late nineteenth century
(Patel 1988: 294). Certain assumptions remained the same in his formulations on
women – women, according to Gandhi were creative individuals but in their own
domestic space, women should not be engaged in economic work as it may destroy
her purity, women’s most important role in politics was that of a mother, as she
instills national consciousness in her children (Patel 1988: 293). Thus, it is easy to
decipher that a woman remained, even for Gandhi, a ‘mother’, and, a ‘nurturer’
with the additional task of participation in select programs in the public sphere
without destroying her inherent purity. The strategy of non-violence that Gandhi
applied against British imperial powers also drew its strength from the new woman
created in this process. The new woman who was to work from her home was
given a specific space in his political ideology. The spinning wheel, which became
a dominant political symbol in the first half of the twentieth century, was located in
the home and women were encouraged to participate in the civil and political space
through it (Patel 1988: 295-96). Sujata Patel regards this as a very shrewd
intervention by Gandhi (Patel 1988: 300).

Gandhi’s efforts provided the much-needed platform for women’s agency
and subjectivity to claim their ‘presence’ in Indian history. The assumption made
by most historians is that women appear in the history of nationalism only in a
“contributive” role⁶. Nationalism rendered its colour to the women’s issue – glorifying women who fulfill their mother roles with exceptional ardor – placed an enormous burden on the women who came within its defining scope. It was the women and the qualities highlighted by the nationalist project as excellent – their commitment, their purity, their sacrifice - which were to ensure the moral, even spiritual power of the nation and hold it together. However, as women too received education or, in some cases, taught themselves to read and write a whole lot of literature was produced, which included life histories, poems, short stories, novels, novellas, essays and letters. Women articulated themselves through their writings; this body of literature tried to give a ‘voice’ to the domesticity itself, which governed the lives of these educated women. At the same time, it also tried to re-constitute/re-formulate the public political space where a community was fighting for national self-government.

The public space had to undergo a change in order to facilitate the strong, emerging voices of women like Pandita Ramabai, Sarojini Naidu. The last decades of the nineteenth century saw others like Ramabai Ranade, Anandibai Joshi, Frenana Sorabjee, Annie Jagannathan, Rakhmabai and others crossing the bounds of familial and cultural restrictions of a patriarchal society and even going abroad to study (Talwar 1999: 206). They returned with a new awareness of their rights and immediately became involved in raising women’s issues in the country forming associations all over the country with various aims and objectives. These organizations all over the country focused on re-fashioning the lives of Indian women in the face of the freedom movement and in the creation of a ‘female
literary tradition’, encouraging the formulation of a virtual community⁶ where women as readers and writers could share their “lived” lives in spite of their geographical and even psychological difference from one another. Elleke Boehmer’s words from the conclusion of *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* may be quoted here:

Can [nationalism’s] idealizing tendencies be calibrated with reference to the day-to-day contexts through which it is expressed in the world? And if so, can it be rethought in a feminizing or more woman-centred direction, so as to acknowledge the discriminations it has helped propagate in the past, and revise or disaggregate its masculinist inheritances from the ground up? (Boehmer 2005: 207)

Gandhi’s version of civic nationalism with an emphasis on the feminine way of doing work can allow an interesting variant of nationalist discourse beginning from the ‘home’ and ‘objects of home’ such as the spinning wheel, from woman centric activities like weaving, spinning, nurturing, caring, etc. Elaborating Gandhi’s perspective of the essence of womanhood and superiority of the feminine principle, Ashis Nandy writes thus:

First, the concept of *naritva*, so repeatedly stressed by Gandhi nearly fifty years before the woman’s liberation movement began, represented more than the dominant Western definition of womanhood. It included some traditional meanings of womanhood in India, such as the belief in a closer conjunction between power, activism, and femininity than between power, activism, and masculinity. It also implied the belief that the feminine principle is a more powerful, dangerous, and uncontrollable principle in the cosmos than the male
principle. But even more central to this concept of womanhood was the traditional Indian belief in the primacy of maternity over conjugal identity (Nandy 1983: 54).

Gandhi based his non-violent nationalism on the simple notion that “women must be the true help-mate of man in the mission of service” toward the nation (Parel 2009: 175). Non-violence itself is a feminine virtue, which believes in giving life and not taking life. If this may be regarded as a feminine form of nationalism, then its elaboration could be traced in the woman’s text. The woman’s text needs to be explored not only for the theme of change which, no doubt, was there but also for adding to the already existing nationalist discourse thereby challenging the “maleness” of the discourse.

Notes

Hans Kohn sees the origin of nationalism as being coeval with the birth of universal history, and its development as part of the same historical process which saw the rise of industrialism and democracy. For Kedourie nationalism is a product of European thought in the last 150 years and can never be judged as an authentic product of any of the non-European civilizations which may lay a claim on it.

Kedourie focuses on the role of disaffected German intellectuals in developing the doctrine of nationalism at the beginning of the nineteenth century from Kant's idea of the autonomy of the will and Herder's belief in the primacy of linguistic communities in establishing modes of thought. In his essay “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” (1784) Kant maintains that to be enlightened is to become mature, to reach adulthood, to stop being dependent on the authority of others, to become free and assume responsibility for one’s own action. When man is not enlightened, he does not employ his own powers of reasoning but rather accepts the guardianship of others as he is told. In this brief essay, he argues that the enlightenment offers mankind a way out of immaturity into the improved condition of maturity. It ensured the public use of one’s
reason whereby man philosophically acquires the status and capacities of a rational and adult being. Modernity thus is directly associated with the acquiring of self reliance - a state of being when man refuses to accept the dictates of others. This state of being, it can be argued leads to the state of being free- after all the primary condition for putting an end to our self imposed dependence is freedom, especially civil freedom. Kant thus throws an interesting light not merely on the state of being enlightened but also of the rise of the sense of freedom or in other words (in case of a country like India which was directly under the British dominance) the rise of nationalist consciousness.

6 The period from 1650 to 1777 popularly known as the Age of Enlightenment was a time when the philosophic life of Europe was at the highest point of intensity and self-confidence, of vitality and optimism. The Age of Enlightenment perceived itself as a time in which human reason was shedding its great light upon nature and humanity, banishing the darkness of the middle ages with its scholastic philosophy, religious dogmatism and political absolutism. Eighteenth century thinkers like David Hume pronounced the distinctions among human races through their writings assuming the inferiority of non European races. He makes use of the Black race as an example insisting that nations existing in the polar region and between the tropics were incapable of the higher attainments of the human races. A closer postcolonial look at the eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophical and historical discourse presents a picture where a paternalistic view of English nationhood becomes evident. Enlightenment philosophy not only established the natural rational grounds for the advancement of knowledge and progress towards moral perfection (countering religious superstition) but also provided a cover up over the violence of appropriation of lands from indigenous inhabitants and the institutionalisation of chattel slavery. This dual imperative fractures Enlightenment discourse making it Eurocentric and allowing a kind of justification for being the white, enlightened, superior civilization to the non-West, non-European world.

6 In Saidian terms Orientalism describes the various disciplines, institutions, processes of investigation and style of thought by which Europeans came to ‘know’ the ‘Orient’ over several centuries, and which reached their height during the rise and consolidation of Nineteenth century imperialism. The key to Said’s interest in this way of knowing Europe’s others is that it effectively demonstrates the link between knowledge and power, for it ‘constructs’ and dominates Orientals in the process of knowing them. The representation of the past (so important in Orientalism) coheres around the Western response to the origin of Islam and the expansion of Muslim civilization. From this point
of origin, the West acquired and developed a stance, a body of ideas and a means of operation to interpret, represent, construct, interact with, and deploy the idea of the Orient.

6 A word, which originally meant a great king or prince, ruling over a friendly federation of kingdoms and principalities.

6 Subroto Dasgupta in his discussion of Bankim’s writings on religion and its importance finds that for Bankim “perfect religion embraces a personal, perfect being – a moral being, God, and love of humanity, and love of nature. In his Hinduism, reduced to its essence, he finds this perfect religion. Hinduism means ‘worship of moral perfection’ and that perfection take the shape of a personal God who is the Supreme Being – the very essence of the Hindu creed. India’s philosophical superiority to the other great cultures of the West lies in Hinduism, the most perfect religion because it alone embraces an impersonal God of nature and of humanity, and a moral, supreme, personal God (Dasgupta 2007: 117-118). Perhaps to some extent this answers Partha Chatterjee’s question why this new national religion has to be based on ‘a purified Hindu ideal’ – the answer to which according to Chatterjee lies first in the possibility of a large popular basis and second, the very identification by modern Orientalist presence in all writings on Indian nationalist thought. (Chatterjee 1999: 75)

6 The writer further maintains that an interesting aspect of contemporary Indian philosophers is that while making a case for India in the face of colonial onslaught, they did not either hide or ignore the defects within Indian theories and realities.

6 Thompson here refers to Jurgen Habermas’s “Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere” and points out that Habermas who was not unaware of the marginalization of women in the public sphere and of the patriarchal character of the bourgeois family, perhaps did not consider this issue to be of any significance at the time of writing “Structural Transformation.” (Thompson 1995: 72)

6 Women had various roles to play in the French Revolution in its early years. In the midst of a continuing shortage of bread, rumors circulated that the royal guards at Versailles, the palace where the King and his family resided, had trampled on the revolutionary colors (red, white, and blue) and plotted counterrevolution. In response, a crowd of women in Paris gathered to march to Versailles to demand an accounting from the King. They trudged the twelve miles from Paris in the rain, arriving soaked and tired. At the end of the day and during the night, thousands of men who had marched from Paris to join them joined the women. The next day the crowd grew more turbulent and eventually broke into the royal apartments, killing two of the King's bodyguards. To
prevent further bloodshed, the King agreed to move his family back to Paris. Women's participation was not confined to rioting and demonstrating. Women began to attend meetings of political clubs, and both men and women soon agitated for the guarantee of women's rights. In July 1790, a leading intellectual and aristocrat, Marie-Jean Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, published a newspaper article in support of full political rights for women. It caused a sensation. In it he argued that France's millions of women should enjoy equal political rights with men. A small band of proponents of women's rights soon took shape in the circles around Condorcet. They met in a group called the Cercle Social (social circle), which launched a campaign for women's rights in 1790–91. One of their most active members in the area of women's rights was the Dutch woman Etta Palm d'Aelders who denounced the prejudices against women that denied them equal rights in marriage and in education. In their newspapers and pamphlets, the Cercle Social, whose members later became ardent republicans, argued for a liberal divorce law and reforms in inheritance laws as well. Their associated political club set up a female section in March 1791 to work specifically on women's issues, including civil equality in the areas of divorce and property.

The boldest statement for women's political rights came from the pen of Marie Gouze (1748–93), who wrote under the pen name Olympe de Gouges. An aspiring playwright, Gouges bitterly attacked slavery and in September 1791 published the Declaration of the Rights of Woman, modeled on the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Following the structure and language of the latter declaration, she showed how women had been excluded from its promises. Though they were denied the right to vote or to hold any office, their participation took various forms. Some demonstrated or even rioted over the price of food; some joined clubs organized by women; others took part in movements against the Revolution, ranging from individual acts of assassination to joining in the massive rebellion in the west of France against the revolutionary government (Censer and Hunt 2001).

During the course of their investigation, they mention five ways in which women comes to be related to the nation:

- As biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities;
- As reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic collectivities
- As participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture;
As signifiers of ethnic/national differences – as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories. (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 2000: 1480)

6 The Rani of Jhansi Regiment was the Women’s Regiment of the Indian National Army, the armed force formed by Indian nationalists in 1942 in Southeast Asia with the aim of overthrowing the British Raj in colonial India, with Japanese assistance. Led by Capt Lakshmi Swaminathan, the unit was raised in July 1943 with volunteers from the expatriate Indian population in South East Asia. These cadets underwent military and combat training with drills, route marches as well as weapons training in rifles, hand grenades, bayonet charge. Later, a number of the cadets were chosen for more advanced training in jungle warfare in Burma. The first qualified troops, numbering nearly five hundred, passed out of the Singapore training camp in March 1944. Some 200 of the cadets were also chosen for nursing training, forming the Chand Bibi Nursing Corps. This unique, short-lived regiment was also a training ground for some of India, and Malaysia’s pioneering post-independence female leaders and activists. In “Nationalism and Feminism in Late Colonial India: The Rani of Jhansi Regiment, 1943-45” Carol Hills and David Silverman show how for Subhas Chandra Bose, the mobilization of powerful women, whose models were rooted in Indian mythology and history was a prerequisite for national liberation (Hills and Silverman 1993: 741).

6 While determining the discourse of nationalism, Sudipta Kaviraj (thinking along similar lines) judges the advent of the Congress as an important stage in the evolution of nationalist discourse. He further maintains:

The creation of a new class of Western-educated intelligentsia, assisted by the bounty of the colonial dispensation, which enabled them to acquire substantial economic assets apart from cultural dominance, altered the terrain of political discourse in basic ways. Increasingly, the new elite deserts the indigenous subaltern classes, forswears any kinship with them, turning historically into leaders without a following. (Kaviraj 1994: 321)

Kaviraj also regards that Gandhi and his ‘peculiar discourse’ achieved a ‘re-combination’ of the increasingly diverging trends of anti-colonial dissent solving the problem by dissolving the differences between the so-called high and low culture of Indian politics.
Kumari Jayawardena writes: “with a few exceptions, the women worked within boundaries laid down by men. The history uncovered in this way is a “contributive” history” (Jayawardena 1986: 261).

One is reminded of Benedict Anderson’s famous definition of the nation: “It is an imagined political community…..it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of the communion” (Anderson 1991: 6).

Works Cited


