

Construction of Ideal Womanhood through Naturalisation in the National Song *Vandemataram*: An Ecocritical Study of Identity Construction of Women in India

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Vandemataram (*I Praise thee Mother*) is a song taken from Bengali writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Anandamath* (1882). But only the first two verses of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Vandemataram* were given the status of national song by the government of India in 1950 to maintain religious neutrality. The common view was that though the first two stanzas described the exquisite beauty of nature and nation, later stanzas were religiously biased. Rabindranath Tagore did not consider this song as a song that could unite people of different religions. He wrote in one of his letters to Subhas Chandra Bose : "The novel *Anandamath* is a work of literature, and so the song is appropriate in it. But Parliament is a place of union for all religious groups, and there the song cannot be appropriate."¹ So the first two stanzas were only adopted as the national song but not as the national anthem. But even these two stanzas are ideologically biased as they are constructed upon anthropocentric and patriarchal discourses. The song was addressed to an imagined woman figure – *Bharatmata* who, it is generally believed, represents the essence of India. She also stands for the ideal womanhood in India. Identification of nation as woman is rooted in anti-colonial Hindu nationalist discourse which is patriarchal in nature. That is why we call our nation "Motherland" not "Fatherland." Ketu H. Katrak observes, "The belief that women even more than men were the *guardians of tradition*, particularly against a foreign enemy, was used to reinforce the most regressive aspects of tradition. Particularly during nationalist movements, slogans such as "mother land" are glorified to counteract colonialist attitudes" (Katrak 398). Women can take

various roles within the nationalist patriotic discourse. Sikita Banerjee in her essay *Gender and Nationalism: The Masculinization of Hinduism and Female Political Participation in India*, opines that women in India took active role in anti-colonial struggle by shedding their feminine traits and internalizing the masculine aspects of militant nationalism. But she was more popular in her role as passive mother. This role was safer and less threatening as “women do not necessarily have to take on masculine traits or erase tangible signs of the femininity to become political actors” and “they can play complementary roles which draw on their socially constructed gender roles based on ideas of hegemonic femininity, motherhood for example” (Banerjee 177). Banerjee observes that woman as mother can contribute to the nationalist narrative in three ways. Firstly, women can reproduce children, especially sons, who can defend the nation often symbolized by woman. Secondly, she brings up and nourishes the children. Lastly, she inculcates in them cultural as well as nationalist values. Thus the construction of ideal womanhood in India was closely entwined with the anti-colonial Hindu nationalist discourse. But this cultural construction of the identity of woman as an idealized mother figure was triggered by another process – naturalisation of woman that is likening woman to nature. An ideal mother is expected to function like nature. Like nature, she must reproduce, nourish and nurture. She should become an abode of comfort and bliss for her children. Nature also exists, from anthropocentric perspective, only to serve man. She must reproduce to supply foods and other necessary materials to man, soothe man who is tired of humdrums of life and please his aesthetic sense. These services of nature as well as that of woman are taken to be free and available. Hence, woman’s contribution (child rearing, food preparation and household management) to domestic economy is ignored and undervalued. Nature’s contribution (foods from plants, natural resources like wind, water and minerals etc.) to nature’s economy are taken to be free and undervalued. In the patriarchal Hindu nationalist discourse, portrayal of nation as mother and associating her with nature result in oppression of both woman and nature by man. Nationalism tried to idealise and mystify both woman and nature by positing both as ideological resistance to western ideals of civilisation and material progress. R. Radhakrishnan in his essay ‘Nationalism, Gender and Narrative’, has discussed how Indian nationalism negotiated with the western ideological invasion. R. Radhakrishnan writes that “Forced by colonialism to negotiate with western blueprints of reason, progress and enlightenment, the nationalist subject straddles two regions or spaces, internalizing Western epistemological modes at the

outer or the purely pragmatic level, and at the inner level maintaining a traditional identity that will not be influenced by the merely pragmatic nature of the outward changes". So the "nationalist rhetoric", he says, "makes 'woman' the pure and ahistorical signifier of 'interiority.' 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 84). My addition to Radhakrishnan's comment is that along with woman, nature too was used by nationalism as an ideological trope against western ideals of science, material progress and civilization. Thus the mystification of both woman and nature serves well the purpose of nationalism, but it also hides the real material condition of both of them.

In *Anandamath*, the song, *Vandemataram* was first sung by the rebel monk Bhavan in a beautiful dreamy ambience of moonlit forest. The other character Mahendra listening to the song asked him who the 'mother' in his song was. Bhavan firmly replied that the mother was the Motherland and he added, "Mother India is our mother. We have no other mother" (Chatterjee 53). So originally the song was addressed to an idealized woman figure that was described in terms of nature and its elements. But the stanzas I'm going to analyse are not the ones that are taken from any translated versions of *Anandamath*. I have taken the song from the "National Song" section of the official portal of the Indian government because I'm going to analyse it as the national song and show how the nation state influences the identity politics by positioning woman in an ideological context of gendered ecology and perpetuating this ideology through the celebration of the bond between woman and nature. The song quoted below was translated by Sri Aurobindo Ghosh:

I bow to thee, Mother,
richly-watered, richly-fruited,
cool with the winds of the south,
dark with the crops of the harvests,
The Mother!
Her nights rejoicing in the glory of the moonlight,
her lands clothed beautifully with her trees in flowering bloom,

sweet of laughter, sweet of speech,

The Mother, giver of boons, giver of bliss.²

The song gives an anthropocentric and patriarchal description of both nature and woman. In the first part of the song, bountiful resources of nature are described and in the later part, maternal characteristics of nature are described. Firstly, the speaker appreciates the beauty of the nation and its natural landscape with sensual images of cool wind, dark field and moonlit night etc. Here nature serves the twin purposes of man. First, it gratifies both his aesthetic sense with its beauty and sublime aspects and secondly, it contributes to the economy with resources like water, wind, crops, trees and flowers. Thus it gratifies man's aesthetic and material needs. But in doing so, nature loses its independent existence outside the needs of man. Only a partial and one-sided description of nature is given. Nature's violent and raw aspects are not mentioned. So the images of desert, rocky and barren land, draught, flood, storm and earthquake are carefully excluded. Nature's violent forces are represented in their tamed and controlled forms. For example, wind is here cool breeze waving over crop field. It soothes both the heated crops and the farmers. Water is abundant but it does not take the form of devastating flood. Nature is appropriated from an anthropocentric perspective to meet the demands of man. Hence the pastoral landscape depicted here with all natural resources is ideal for anthropocentric nationalist discourse.

In the last two lines, maternal aspects of nature are described. In other words, nature is depicted in terms of an ideal virtuous Indian mother. Her image complies with the dominant patriarchal ideologies. In appearance, she should be a woman with sweet speech and sweet laughter. Sweetness and delicacy, the two essential aspects of femininity according to patriarchal norms, are found here in the portrayal of the mother. She must also be a giver of boons and bliss. In Indian tradition, women are considered to take a pivotal role in bringing domestic peace and prosperity. In *Manusmriti*, an ancient legal text on social codes of conducts and practices, we can find ample evidences of this. Manu said in his book: "There is no difference at all between the goddesses of good fortune (*śriyas*) who live in houses and women (*striyas*) who are the lamps of their houses, worthy of reverence and greatly blessed because of their progeny" (9.26). Subsequently he adds, "Children, the fulfilment of duties, obedience, and the ultimate sexual pleasure depend upon a wife, and so does heaven, for oneself and one's ancestors" (9.28). So woman, like nature, must please man

aesthetically with his delicate feminine qualities as well as contribute to his material progress and prosperity with her domestic labour. But these services, like that of nature, are taken to be free and available. Besides all these, the song idealises and mystifies both woman and nature. In doing so, nationalism can posit them as a symbol of pure pre-colonial pristine Indianness that is beyond history and change against the western enlightenment ideals of science, progress and civilization.

Notes :

Rabindranath Tagore is quoted from ‘Tagore and that song’ written by Anirban Mitra and Souvik Bhattacharyya published in *The Hindu* on June 22, 2015. <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page/tagore-and-that-song/article7342972.ece>

1. See the official portal of India government: , http://knowindia.gov.in/knowindia/national_symbols.php?id=12>

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