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Deconstructing the Hailing of “Mother India”

By Nandini Gupta

Abstract

This paper focuses on the gendered discourse of nationalism by studying the iconography of “Mother India”. It will also examine the ways through which the representation of motherhood as national allegory creates a gendered meaning of nationalism. By tracing the historiography of “Mother India”, it will also highlight how men during the Indian nationalist period took the center stage as protectors while women were left behind as m(others) of a vulnerable nation that needs to be protected.

Keywords: Mother India, Gendered nationalisms, Patriarchal violence, Masculinised nationalisms

Introduction

Virginia Woolf’s chant in her book *Three Guineas*— “As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country...” (Woolf, 1947, p.197)—calls into question the intricate relationship between gender and nation. Gender relations have often been recognized as driving forces in perpetuating the symbolic and cultural ideology of the nation state. The aim of this paper is to look at this interplay of gender and nationalism which is very much riddled with political meaning.

The central premise of my argument revolves around the myth of “Mother India” that elucidates the gendered history of Indian nationalism. By critically examining the rhetoric of “Mother India”, I attempt to deconstruct the grand narrative of nationalism at both a contextual and textual level. The aim behind revealing the inconsistencies in the representation of national discourse through female divinity is to interrogate the identity of “Mother India” itself. Despite the association of the mother as a symbol of power, this paper examines how this myth was mobilized for creating the patriarchal “utopia”—the creation of an ideal nation-state based on the restrictive and exploitative role of women.

Who Gave Birth to the “Mother”? 

The concept of nation has been of paramount importance for colonized countries. The strident motive behind most of the decolonizing struggles was to formulate the desire for a unified nation that could bind the people together and indoctrinate their minds with the ideas of national history and collective destiny (Fanon, 1961, p.12). This same zeal was witnessed in the Indian independence struggle where an identity was created against the Western ideas of freedom and

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modernity. What I want to explore in this section is how the birth of a new ideal called “Mother India” helped radicalize the national history for self-rule and freedom from colonial rule.

The myth of “Mother India” extensively nurtured the paradigms of selfhood and freedom of the Indian people who were viewed through Eurocentric models of existence. But the question that has been the target of a critical investigation is: “How native is the myth of ‘Mother India’?” The answer to this question reveals astounding facts that are usually stifled in the unilateral glorification of nationalism. Conspicuous postcolonial scholars like Ranajit Guha blatantly remark that the means of carving the historiography of the nation states like India are spurious because they are “spawned and nurtured by colonialism itself” (Guha, 1997, p.5). The central premise of my argument in this section is quite similar to what Guha is arguing: “Mother India”, which outwardly appears to be the result of the eternal heritage of Indian culture, is actually very much a Western construct. By tracing the genealogy of the icon of “Mother India”, the political discourse behind its deification can be deconstructed.

The myth of “Mother India” came from the controversial book “Mother India” written by the Western writer Katherine Mayo. She highlighted the unfortunate state of Indian women during the national struggle in a health report because of the “inertia, helplessness, lack of initiative and originality, sterility of enthusiasm” (Mayo, 1917, p.24) of Indian men. She severely critiqued the oppressed status of Indian women in India who were reified as goddesses in the temple but at the same time inhumanely treated in their homes. According to George Matthew Dutcher, Mayo has reiterated Indian women’s dependence on men. He also explains how “marriage and motherhood are forced upon girls before there has been an opportunity to train them for either of these responsibilities or to give to more than eighteen in the thousand even a smattering of primary education” (Dutcher, 1928, p.123). Mayo discusses the purdah system, female foeticide, and highlights how in each generation more than 3,000,000 women die during childbirth (Mayo, 1927, p.49). These assumptions about Indian culture created havoc in the independence movement, and male nationalist leaders were horrified by her Eurocentric representation under the title “Mother India”. Gandhi, for instance, called it “drain inspector’s report” (2002, p. 214). To counter this representation, the ideal of “Mother India” was re-evoked by the hands of male national leaders of Indian independence.

The creation of “Mother India” by Hindu nationalists in this regard could be seen as an attempt to redeem themselves from the colonial essentialism of first world scholars like Mayo who conspicuously produced a crisis in their masculine chivalry. By creating this overarching model of a female divine, there was an attempt to resist the “aggression, achievement, control, competition and power of the colonial master” (Nandy, 1980, p.9) who constantly keep othering the “other” in order to lionize the “self”.

To resist constant humiliation, the discourse of “Mother India” had to be co-opted by the militant nationalists to claim a space for autonomous subjectivity. Nationalists strategically inverted the metaphor used by Mayo and gave it a spiritual outlook where the ideal of “Mother India” was imbued with veneration and national pride. The strident goddess adorned all maps of the country, and the female body became a potent vehicle to battle the prejudiced portrayal of national culture. As Chatterjee argues, in the “entire phase of the national struggle, the crucial need was to protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of the national culture” (Chatterjee, 1990, p.239).

“Mother India”, therefore, became an ideal embodiment of national pride that was designed as a social norm. Because women in patriarchal societies are always “expected to become the repositories and safeguarders of morality” (Condren, 1989, p.1), as mothers of India, they were
the ones who became the guardians of this national pride. They were also encouraged to embody inner spirituality, which lay at the core of national identity. Their emblematic use of their bodies in the nationalist discourse worked in tandem with the patriarchal construction of national honour. The use of women’s bodies in delineating this task exemplifies Nancy Jay’s argument that sacrifice is the “remedy for having been born of woman” (Jay, 2001, p.1). The discourse of sacrifice in this regard works as a performative act where men act actively to guard the honour of their motherland. Figure.1 is a symbolic representation of how this discourse was circulated and legitimized.

**Figure 1: “Maa ki Pukar” (Mother’s Call), artist not known, 1966. Print published by Murari Fine Arts, Delhi. J. P. S. Uberoi and Patricia Uberoi Collection, Delhi**

Therefore, the regular performance of this act through the use of the “Mother India” myth created the identity of brave Indian men. However, the formulation of the identity of Indian men came at the cost of alienating Indian women’s selfhood. In other words, it became a modern enactment of a tribal sacrifice where:

In the most explicit initiation rites of tribal warriors, some young men actually step on their mother's bellies in a gesture signifying their successful initiation or individuation. (Condren, 1989, p.5)

This is a clear illustration of how the body of the mother was used as a cartography of the nation where men sacrificed the mother in order to establish their presence. This active production of the discourses of sacred and sacrifice perpetuates a particular hegemonic and religious form of power where the dyad of mother and son has been taken over by nation and nationalism. The sacrifice of the mother also instantiates a performance of a communion sacrifice that unites the
worshippers in one moral community and lays down the terms for symbolic “sacrificial contract” (Kristeva, 1981, p.73).

Furthermore, this exclusion of the mother from the patriarchal “sacrificial contract” (ibid) is coupled with the creation of selfhood. As Julia Kristeva argues, the nationalist ideology spearheaded by men thrives on the outright exclusion of the “other” (Kristeva, 1991, p.23). In this instance, the “other” is the mother. The divine symbol of “Mother India”, which outwardly represents female power, is not excluded from this annihilation. A deeper penetration into her making postulates that she is not at all an independent goddess with autonomous subjectivity, but a sacrificial victim—a mother who is guarded by her brave sons. Figure 1 exemplifies how her power is tied to the production of male honour of the nationF -state. As a mother, there is an ideological obligation for her to perpetuate the lineage of purity. Irigaray’s critique further clarifies the politics of the imagery of sacred and sacrifice:

“Patriarchal culture is based on sacrifice, crime and war. It is a culture that makes it men's duty or right to fight in order to feed themselves, to inhabit a place, and to defend their property, their families, and a country as their property”. (Irigaray, 1994, p.5)

Consequently, by creating the identity of “Mother India”, nationalist leaders “forged the secret world of the battlefield” (Condren, 1995, p.163) where the body of the mother both literally and metaphorically is placed as an object of male scrutiny. Indian men who were socially marginalized based on their masculine virility actively used the myth of motherland to elevate themselves as heroes transcending the ideological essentialism of the colonizer “through the willingness to sacrifice and the search for purity of the origin” (Condren, 2000, p.15).

Creating the “Self” by Killing the “Other”: The Creation of Mother Nation at the Expense of Mother Earth

The sudden creation of a strong myth like “Mother India” raises the question: How were Indian nationalists successful in creating such a strong imagery and in making people affirm their faith in it? To explore this question, I want to instantiate “Mother India” an “invented tradition” produced to idealize various political aspirations. Eric Hobsbawm, a prominent historian, sheds light on how invented traditions are a set of practices that are politically constructed to “seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (Hobsbawm, 1983, p.2). In this light, the symbolic reverence, which was created through the iconography of “Mother India”, can also be viewed as an invented myth. But a question that arises from this assertion is: Which previous myth did the imagery of “Mother India” use to legitimize its presence? One of the myths that was used to create the identity of “Mother India” was the myth of the Earth goddess. The primordial identity of the Earth goddess was used as the alter-ego of the mother nation. By implying the link with her mythological pasts, “Mother India” was given a ceaseless existence that cannot be questioned and therefore had to be accepted as the routine symbol of reverence. But in the process of creating itself as the all-pervasive symbol, it not only distorted the identity of the archaic myth of the Earth goddess, but also obliterated her existence completely.

The myth of the Earth goddess has been of paramount importance in most of the mythologies. But in wielding the identity of the Earth goddess, the system of patriarchal power, as
Hobsbawm had rightly predicted, reversed her bases according to its own vested motives of control. The Earth goddess that stood as a nurturing mother in all tribes and religions in India was superseded by the goddess that had to be nurtured only by Hindu nationalism. The political supremacy was deliberately produced in order to create a religious dichotomy. Anyone who had his/her faith outside the commandments of “Hindutva” was de-masculinized and was rendered incapable of serving the mother. Through this, the identity of an unborn nation that still had to take its first breath of freedom was fastened with the ideology of Hindu ways of living. In this regard, “Mother India” became a "container and vehicle of Indian tradition, the essence, the inner side, the spirituality and greatness of Hindu civilization” (Pandey, 1991, p. 289).

Furthermore, Indian culture was reconfigured on both a spiritual and cultural level. As the first section of the essay pointed out, with the coming of “Mother India” as a central goddess of worship, the divine values of all-permeating love were taken over by the culture of sacrifice. The altar of sacrifice substituted the bountiful glory of mother earth (Condren, 2009, p.258). This sacrificial culture not only demolished the matrilineal structures of kinship but also gave birth to a nation where women can be represented as radiating the glory of motherhood but never as fulfilled by other means. They are forced to make difficult choices either to be the mother (given that is a boy child as this is what makes them true mothers) or a woman who is guarded as a male property (Irigaray, 1984, p.70). The use of sacrifice in achieving this patriarchal utopia has a potent meaning. Nancy Jay highlights how: “sacrificial traditions have rarely been questioned about the ways they are grounded in the social relations of reproduction or about the ways they work to achieve male domination” (Jay, 1992, p. 147).

In the case of “Mother India”, the sacrificial traditions intersect with the politics of religious discourse. The question that gained significant importance was not who made the sacrifice? But whose sacrifice will be deemed legitimate? The legitimization of sacrifice was highly premised on the politics of religion. Only a Hindu was considered a “true nationalist son” (Sethi, 2000, p.3) capable of offering sacrifice to his mother. The above point is personified through a ubiquitous chant rampantly used during the Indian national struggle, which also reverberates the masculine possession of a female nation: “we call our land our mother but for her, we have no mother, father, brother or friend. We have neither wife nor son nor home. We have her” (Chatterjee, 1882, p.673). It succinctly reflects the birth of a discriminatory discourse completely antithetical to the original ideal of the Earth goddess. Every aspect of “Mother India” was stringently tied to the rhetoric of her Hindu sons. Contrary to the imagery of the Earth goddess, who was known for her fertility and sexual fruitfulness, the discourse of the nation goddess was premised around female chastity and sacrifice. “Mother India” was an asexual symbol of femininity whose desire for corporal love is actively abjected and reduced (Irigaray, 1984, p.64). I have juxtaposed two distinct representations of “Mother Earth” and “Mother India” to personify the strategic manoeuvring of their identities and re-writing of mythical pasts.
Figures 3 and 4 explicitly epitomize how the identity of Mother Earth was completely battered down. Figure 3 visibly showcases her sexual and physical emancipation while Figure 4
depicts making the mother great through the valour of her sons. She is clothed in the tri-colour flag and is accessorized through the discourse of obeisance. The latter figure of the mother was idealized, and other women were socialized to subsume their sexuality within the spiritual realm, leaving behind the realms of the physical, of desire, and of pleasure (Kayrak, 2012, p. 399). This hegemonic seizure of female divinity mirrors the claim made by Marion Woodman who elucidates that if our subjectivity is represented through “exclusively male images of divinity, or by trauma inducing parental figures” (Condren, 2009, p.390) this can colonize women’s body and psyche by suspending their critical faculties in the favour of violent regimes (ibid). By being a part of this patriarchal violence, women were made to believe that the ideal of the Earth goddess coalesced into the creation of “Mother India”. Consequently, the access for divinity was no longer found in "the mother of bounty earth, wild forests” (Chatterjee, 1882, p.677) but in a mother guarded by her virile son who would seize control over her and “cut his mother in half to create heaven and earth” (Condren, 2009, p.3).

This comparative analysis of the genealogical existence of both Mother Earth and “Mother India” brings startling facts to the forefront. As previously mentioned, it shows how patriarchal violence was naturalized and made to be internalized through strategic manoeuvring of ancient traditions. The authoritarian regime that effaced the difference so neatly is an insignia of what totalitarian nationalism can do. The critical investigation of an overtly “powerful deity” posits how deeply patriarchal violence has been institutionalized throughout the world. Though she appears as a female divine, inwardly she is nothing but a filament of patriarchal imagination that is yet to be realized. The pseudo embodiment of her female power is a reminder of what Hannah Arendt envisaged as totalitarian rule:

“The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.” (1951, p.447)

Dividing Spaces, Conquering Women: The Creation of Private and Public Spaces

After distorting the ideology of Mother Earth, Indian nationalists wanted to idolize the myth of “Mother India” for every Indian woman. This section will discuss how this effort was executed by monopolizing public spaces and creating private spaces for women. The public sphere, according to Habermas, is a harbinger of a new social order within the apparatus of the model state (Habermas, 1989 p.89). Feminist critics have ostensibly argued that this public sphere, which Habermas has idealized as a “structural transformation” (ibid) is actually male-centred. Building on this, in this section, I will study how the public sphere that was a formidable tool to protest British rule during Indian independence was also just a male bastion. By critically examining its gendered aspect, I seek to examine how it delineated firmer gender boundaries and privileged the masculine idealization of high household as a microcosm to political, economic, and social order.

As the previous section of the paper has highlighted, the icon of “Mother India” became a driving force to legitimize the sacred symbolic order during the national struggle. The supportive argument that I want to present here is how the creation of sacred and profane worked in tandem with the making of private and public. Just as sacred, the fabrication of private and public also manifested the “exclusionary matrix” (Butler, 1993, p.3), which was used as a strategy to exclude women from active participation in the making of the nation-state. They were divided between the
conflicting and competing spaces of Ghar (home) and Bahar (outside), the first symbolizing femininity and latter symbolizing masculinity. The private space of the house was considered sacred for women while public spaces were profane as it took them away from their responsibilities towards children and husbands. Although women were given minor access to the public sphere in order to undertake the task of female emancipation, the primary duty for mothers of India was still towards their families that restricted them to the private domain. Women were ideologically coerced into the “empirical parameters of sexual-familial dimensions such as ‘Are you a virgin? Are you married? Who is your husband?’” (Irigaray, 1984, p.64). Under any circumstances, they were not allowed to actively participate in the national struggle. Their bodies, as the embodiment of national honour, had to be protected from the polluting influences of the “other”. Their honour became a cardinal influence in the war.

Feminist thinker Jean Elshtain calls it a misogynist strategy that is delineated through the “Beautiful Souls” narrative. According to her, women's consent and participation in the war is not only irrelevant but also strictly prohibited. Evoking Hegel’s postulation on this narrative, she confers that women as beautiful souls are not only contained in the patriarchal imagery of being labelled as innocent beings, but are also rendered incapable of handling the tactics of warfare (Elshtain, 1982, p.29). This narrative was compellingly mirrored during Indian independence in which women were viewed as pure and beautiful souls inept of handling violent protests. Prominent nationalist leaders like Gandhi, who otherwise played a significant role in women’s emancipation, outrightly excluded women from combatant roles by stating:

“Just as Hindus do not harm a cow, the British do not attack women as far as possible. For Hindus, it would be cowardice to take a cow to the battlefield. In the same way, it would be cowardice for us to have women accompany us” (Gandhi, 1971, p.12). On the other hand, women were viewed as harbingers for his principles of ahimsa (nonviolence): 'If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women' (Young India, 2012, p.21).

Another reason that barricaded women’s movements was their symbolic comparison with the idol of “Mother India”. They became the surrogate portraits of “Mother India” and were therefore regarded as “culture carriers” (Davis, Yuval, 2000, p.80) of femininity by maintaining the rich heritage of motherhood. Their exclusion from the public domain was stringently premised on the political discourse of motherhood. Through restricting the spatial movements of a woman, the discourse of chastity and male protection was brought into practice. This became a vehicle for national patriarchy to inflict the personal realm with constant scrutiny. The “panopticon” of the masculine gaze created an environment of perpetual surveillance. Following Foucault's view on docile bodies, the nationalist intelligentsia used women as weapons to perpetuate its cultural and political currency where the female body of “Mother India” was used to represent the nation (Banet-Weiser 1999).

Therefore, it can be argued that both women’s sexuality and their body became the “material and discursive sites where nation [was] performed, values [were] contested, and borders and boundaries [were] policed and controlled” (Oza, 2006, p.1080). A strong message that was propagated in order to privatize women’s action was “Aap Ghar ki Laksmi Ho” (You are the Goddess of Wealth). And it goes without saying that this wealth had to be protected by its entitled owner. Following Foucault’s (1977) speculation on surveillance, the disciplinary gaze of nationalist patriarchy not only controlled the female body but also induced a psychological state
of “conscious and permanent visibility” (Foucault, 1977, p. 201), which women willingly adhered to to a certain extent. But the point of my argument is also to examine why the iconography of “Mother India” made women willingly accept the model of patriarchal power.

In order to look at this complex phenomenon, Bourdieu’s idea of symbolic violence can help in understanding what he calls a “paradox of doxa” (Bourdieu, 2001, p.5). According to Bourdieu, the domination that women experience is not exercised by physical or coercive modes but through a form of: “symbolic violence, a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition, recognition, or even feeling (Bourdieu 2001, p.2). Because it was used through the medium of symbolic violence, women did not perceive it as abnormal. It does not appear as a regulating force; it often goes unnoticed and keeps reproducing the relations of domination.

This segregation of public and private spheres also intersected with the making of the new identity of Indian women; Partha Chatterjee concurs that Indian women were remade under national struggle. When addressing female chastity for representing India’s superiority and spiritual plenitude, it is very important to note that only a selective class of women were entrusted to represent this (Chatterjee, 1990, p.87). As John and Niranjana note, during the national struggle, it was only middle-class women who had the right to purity. In other words, only “she is entitled to the name of ‘woman’ in this society” (John and Niranjana 1999, p.584). The process for creating identification with this “ideal woman” was done through the imagery of “Mother India”. The very first look at the iconography of “Mother India” posits her as a very white, heterosexual woman who is middle class in her appearance. This is showcased in Figure 2. It is a painting by a prominent painter, Abanindranath Tagore, who represented the mother in the clothing of chastity and honour.

Figure 2: Abanindranath Tagore “Bharat Mata”
Max resolution: 350x546px
Later, this model served as a reminder to passive viewers of their own subordination, but as mothers at home and role models in the public, they constantly challenged the ideological apparatuses of the nation state. The pictures below depict examples of outraged women who have subverted the traditional, patriarchal iconography of the “Mother India” figure. However, it would be pertinent to highlight that despite the strong control and power, women of postcolonial India were able to map out spaces of subversion and resistance.

Figure 6: Bharat Mata (Mother India) by Dr. Lal Ratnakar. Size: 300*271

The above picture scathingly destabilizes the hegemonic representation of “Mother India”. The mother in this picture is a dark skinned Adivasi woman (tribal woman) who is accompanied by her black buffalo and not the Hindu sacrificial cow to claim her presence in the discourse of nationalism. The picture below was an outrageous refusal of the gendered nationalism by the university students “Pinjra told” (Break the cage) in India, who replaced the picture of a submissive woman with a non-conformist deity.
This is an attempt to bring an alternate representation to the fore that does not show women as subordinate to men; they supersede masculine bastions of “truth”. Figure 3 is a portrayal of Goddess “Durga”, who refuses to lend her power to the male gods because she is a militant representation of a powerful and fierce woman. These sites of active defiance and confrontation strive not only to relocate power but to decentralize it and finally invert it into a democratizing model of egalitarian society.

**Conclusion**

After analysing the ideal of "Mother India" from different facets, Cynthia Enloe’s remark about nationalism is extremely relevant; she states that nationalism has ‘typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope’ (in McClintock 1993”). “Mother India” was also a generative seed for the masculine order to plant their ideology of symbolic violence and control. The ideal not only excluded women from its ambit but all the polluting ‘others’ like Muslims, lower class men, tribal women, and homosexuals in order to envisage a nation that would become a charter for the patriarchal utopia. The feminist interventions mentioned in the paper have tried to question this and bring out waves of change and inclusivity. A strong dictum “Mother India “: Ma se aazadi, ma ki aazadi (freedom from the Mother, freedom for the Mother)” by the Pinjra Tod movement (Break the Cage) shows a way towards inclusivity and acceptance for all.
References

Books


**Journal articles**