



BETWEEN INDIA AND THE WEST: AN OVERVIEW ON CULTURE(S), POLITICS AND GENDER(S)

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The present subsection is aimed at grouping together and re-publishing some insightful analyses on a number of socio-philosophical topics foreboding important practical and political consequences.

Even though the following articles are already well-known, their unification in an individual frame can be useful. These pieces of work can be considered as tesserae in a mosaic. In fact, everyone of them analyses a fundamental issue of contemporary (Indian) society through a specific point of view. All together, they complete each other and create a very interesting comprehensive view.

The issues lively debated in the following articles are mainly three, namely 'feminism(s)', 'gender(s)', 'culture(s)' and the politics related to them. However, the focus as well as the 'intellectual baggage' here considered are not limited to India. For this reason, these articles have a double advantage. On one hand, they allow to appreciate a point of view 'internal' to the Indian socio-political trend. On the other, they are useful dialogical tools in the international debate, where these topics are debated in more general terms. In this sphere, they question a number of two-dimensional points of views about women and culture in the 'Third World'.

Before we start, however, it is important to specify some elements. The terms used as well as the 'positionality' of the authors are to be clarified. In both cases, it is absolutely necessary to keep a distance from any essentialisation of the concepts and the definitions involved.

There are some common linking points amongst these authors. They all have a strong link with India, for birth and/or study reasons, but have been living and teaching abroad for a (great) part of their lives. They all are part of the 'postcolonialism', because some of them were actually born in a former colony and because they all



confront themselves with this specific critical approach. All of them can be defined as 'feminists', even though everyone of them analyses and interprets a distinctive aspect of the many faces of what can be called 'feminism'.

In this case, then, the postcolonial location and the diasporic point of view add something to these scholars's perspectives. In fact, their specific 'positionality' produces less ethnocentric outlooks than those of some 'western' feminists.

Regarding the terms used, the wisest option is probably to advise that they should not be considered as ready-made labels.

The specific version of 'feminism(s)' presented here is quite complex. It has originated in the so-called 'Third World' and can provide detailed criticisms to the feminist general discourses. In this way, it brings to light many aspects of feminist politics normally considered positively by the western Academia, but that can have negative consequences in other contexts.

A similar discourse can be made about the term 'gender(s)'. It is not used as a simple synonym of 'women'. Here, its meaning is broader and more similar to 'sexuality'. In this way, the 'gender' idea becomes a powerful analytic tool and assumes a new inclusive and empowering meaning in politics.

Finally, the 'culture' discussed by these authors can be considered by two different points of view. In the 'external' debate between East and West, it is an useful dialogical tool to draw a broader, more flexible and more realistic vision of what culture(s) are. In the Indian 'internal' dialogue, a more nuanced and wary political vision of culture is necessary to understand and to fight against Hindu communalism¹.

Another linking point is the constant questioning on the intellectual tools used. A special attention is given to the definition and representation of the subjects and objects of study.

The authors, then, are interested not only in giving explanations of the terms, but also in investigating the politics connected to a certain vision of these issues. In other words, all five of them share a keen interest in the practical consequences of the different ideological positions involved.

¹ That is the new, violent nationalism which imagine a Hindu India cleaned of all 'external' elements. This is one of the main preoccupations for all these authors.



Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's as well as Nivedita Menon's texts are two overviews about the – mainly but non exclusively Indian – general feminist thinking.

In her “Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?”², Rajeswari Sunder Rajan analyses the pros and cons of “the ‘feminist’ recuperation of goddess’ socio-political meaning”. The feminist expectations toward the ‘Hindu Goddess’ are easy to grasp. In fact, as the author explains: “[w]hen a community’s object of worship and veneration is female, it is logical to expect that women in general benefit by sharing that elevated status.” Nevertheless, Sunder Rajan points out the ambiguities of an easy equation between Goddess(es) religious importance and female power and agency. She affirms that: “the divide between goddesses and women as social beings can be maintained by patriarchy without any sense of contradiction”. In effect, also the Hindu right movements have recuperated the Goddess figure as a model for their women. For that reason, the author states that an uncritical recuperation is at least ambiguous and can be even dangerous. In her article, Sunder Rajan analyses the multifaceted ways to interpret the same tradition. Every interpretation, in fact, can have remarkable consequences on the Indian politics. Her focus is on political appropriations which range from left to right. She enumerates the different behavioural patterns provided to Indian women by the Hindu tradition. Some of them – like the *pativrata* or devoted wife, based on the figures of Sita or Savitri – are widely accepted and highly recommended. Others exist but only as exceptions or as explanations for deviant female behaviour – like the *vir-anganas* or heroic armed queens, and the Goddess in her powerful and autonomous incarnations. Throughout a critical approach, Sunder Rajan draws a scheme of the different ideological positions involved and of their consequences on feminist politics.

In her “Introduction”³ to the monograph *Recovering Subversion*, Nivedita Menon highlights the problems which arise from the clash between a unique law and the need of a more nuanced concept of individual rights. In broad terms, the author’s analysis leads to something we could call ‘the complexities of subjectivation’. Menon

² R. Sunder Rajan, “Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?”, originally published in *Economical and Political Weekly*, October 31 (1998). For consulting the current issue of EPW, see <http://epw.in/epw/user/userindexHome.jsp>.

³ N. Menon, “Introduction” in *Recovering Subversion. Feminist Politics Beyond the Law*, Ranikhet, Permanent Black, 2004.



affirms that in her book “the focus [...] is squarely on the law and the state as engaged with by feminist practices.” In analysing this intertwining, the scholar faces a twofold question. From one hand, in fact, there is the constitutionalism and its need to erase the differences between its subjects in order to ensure equality and rights. From the other, there are the differences and their claim for recognition. Menon says there is a “‘paradox of constitutionalism’ – that is, the tension in which the need to assert various and differing moral visions comes up against the universalising drive of constitutionality and the language of universal rights”. From this opposition, a dilemma arises for radical (feminist) politics in India. These latter, in fact, have to confront the constitutionalism’s homogenising force, which ensure individual rights “by a process of enforcing universal norms that marginalise, render obsolete and de-legitimise contesting worldviews and value systems”. Briefly stated, this can be read as a conflict between feminism – as specific and context-rooted – and human rights ethic – as general and imagined in universal terms. A peculiar aspect of ‘Third World feminism’ is the deep attention to the many differences existing between its presumed subjects. In India, for example, it is impossible to appeal “to ‘women’ as a category unmediated by other identities like religion and caste”. According to this point of view, the same subjects of feminist politics are not clearly defined. Assuming all this as a point of strength rather than of weakness, Menon says that: “the creation of ‘women’ as subject should be understood to be the goal of feminist politics, not its starting point”. This creation can be made only by questioning other and important issues, like the citizenship concept, the representation idea, and the subject of radical politics in general. Besides, the idea of sustaining ‘woman’ as the subject of feminist politics has become more and more difficult “despite (or perhaps because of) the explosion of ‘gender’ as a category of analysis in official state and NGO discourse”. In her reasoning, the scholar confronts herself with a perception of ‘gender’ capable of disrupting old and rooted assumptions, like the naturalness of the ‘body’ and the sexes’ sharp dichotomy.

In her “Undoing the ‘Package Picture’ of Cultures”⁴, Uma Narayan analyses, briefly but incisively, the issue of culture, sum-

⁴ U. Narayan, “Undoing the ‘Package Picture’ of Cultures”, originally published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 25 (2000), 4, pp. 1083-1086.



marising some points she had already expressed in her book *Dislocating Cultures*⁵. She shows how an enclosed and narrow idea of what cultures are can be a serious obstacle for feminist work. It is exactly from a similar vision that the idea of an essential and eternal difference between ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ culture arises. As Narayan clearly shows in her book, this bears pernicious consequences for the Third World feminists, often accused of being ‘westernised’. This accusation is based on a static vision of what cultures are. Besides, the idea of ‘westernisation’ implies a ‘selective labeling’ of what can be defined as ‘eastern’ and what has to be labelled as ‘western’ in postcolonial contexts, namely complex and hybrid by definition. The philosopher underlines how difficult a task is to define individual cultures, due to the great variations within each culture and the many similarities between different/distant cultures. Narayan says: “The Package Picture of Cultures mistakenly sees the centrality of particular values, traditions, or practices to any particular culture as a given and thus eclipses the historical and political processes by which particular values or practices have come to be deemed central components of a particular culture. It also obscures how projects of cultural preservation themselves change over time.” At the same time, the philosopher states that: “Giving up the Package Picture’s view of cultural contexts as homogeneous helps us see that sharp differences in values often exist among those described as members of the same culture while among those described as ‘members of different cultures’ there are often strong affinities”. By blurring the boundaries between cultures, the dialogue amongst feminists located in different cultural contexts can become more flexible and profitable.

In her “When the (Hindu) Nation Exiles Its Queers”⁶, Paola Bacchetta describes how the Hindu right movements treat ‘queerness’ in theory and practice. She analyses the political meaning of ‘queerness’ in general, as well as the construction of an acceptable ‘sexual way’ by the Hindu nationalist ideologists. The author investigates “exclusively Hindu nationalist men’s discourse (configured by male ideologues for male addressees) and practice (of male actors),

⁵ U. Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures. Identity, Traditions, and Third World Feminism*, New York and London, Routledge, 1997.

⁶ P. Bacchetta “When the (Hindu) Nation Exiles Its Queers”, originally published in *Social Text* 61, 17, (Winter, 1999), 4, pp. 141-166.



and will thereby reflect male subjectivity to the exclusion of women”. As a matter of fact, queerness often plays an important role in politics. It can be used as a demeaning accusation towards enemies, and in that sense it is a powerful ideological tool⁷. For that reason, some scholars accuse Hindu right ideologists to be ‘queer’. In recent years, however, ‘queer’ and ‘queerness’ has become part of the self-definition of LGBTI groups⁸. Departing from this latter idea of queerness, Bacchetta replies that “Hindu nationalism is an expression not of queer sexualities or mentalities but rather of queerphobic ones”. Nevertheless, this obsession about queerness is shown by different and sometimes conflicting attitudes. It can give rise either to phobias or to inclusions. As a ‘phobia’, the preoccupation for queerness is expressed in a twofold way by Hindu right. There is, in fact, a *xenophobic queerphobia* and a *queerphobic xenophobia*. The former is “a particular form of queerphobia that justifies itself by constructing the self-identified Indian queer as originating outside the self-same nation”. The latter is “a particular type of xenophobia in which queerness is assigned (often metaphorically) to all

⁷ The political meanings of queerness in India are very complex. Here we can only briefly refer to Gandhi, who presented himself as an ascetic, underlining the feminine elements of his personality. Notwithstanding this traditional Indian positive evaluation of ‘celibacy/sexual indeterminacy’, the accusations of queerness are quite common in Hindu nationalist speeches. In her “Men’ Who Would Be Kings”, Gayatri Reddy shows how the ‘queerness accusation’ has been used also by unsuspected actors above suspicion. During the 2000 regional political campaigns, in fact, many *hijras* (eunuchs) proposed themselves as candidates. In their campaign, Hindu nationalists generally accused their opponents to be ‘eunuchs’. In their replies, *hijras* set up a dichotomy between *fake* and *real* eunuchs. This opposition was based on a traditional reading of *hijras* who, castrating themselves, obtain honour and become ascetics, that is more free than people involved in heterosexual ways of living and also more similar and nearer to the deities. Here we cannot deal with the meanings and implications of this *hijras*’ rearticulation of the accusation of queerness. For a very interesting and insightful analysis of the *hijras*’ presence in politics, and on the ambiguous consequences of it, see Gayatri Reddy’s “Men’ Who Would Be Kings: Celibacy, Emasculation, and the Re-Production of Hijras in Contemporary Indian Politics”, *Social Research*, 70 (1), pp. 163-200.

⁸ As stated by Bacchetta herself: “*Queer* has a complicated trajectory; it circulates with multi-directionality in gender and sexuality discourse. Though *queer* was first imposed as an insult to gender and sexual dissidents in normalizing discourse, self-identified queer subjects have adopted and reconfigured the term as a useful collective oppositional site (wherein many oppositional positionalities coexist) to those same normalizing discourses.” The LGBT appropriation of ‘queer’ started in western radical LGBTI groups during the 1960s. In India, the use of this term is even more recent, but it refers to phenomena and movements deeply rooted in its history and society. In fact, there is a broad Indian (religious and philosophical) tradition which describes many deities as bisexual or as sexually ambivalent. This radical queerness of gods and goddesses, in which male and female elements mix up and blur, is seen as a sign of completeness.



the designated Others of the nation regardless of their sexual identity”. In both cases, queerness is a reason for marginalisation and degradation. These exclusivist and violent views lead to the metaphorical and/or real erasing of parts of Indian social body. On one hand, there is the exclusion of queer subjects from Indian politics and their culpability stated by law⁹. On the other, there are the real mutilations of the physical Muslim body as a metaphor for the cleaning of the social body of the nation. However, while the phobic attitudes towards queerness are clear in principle at least, the inclusion is not. It works at two levels, muddling up positive and negative elements into an odd combination. On one hand, there is a voluntary inclusion of queerness into Hindu politics. In fact, following the traditional Hindu appreciation of the divine sexual queerness, nationalist leaders are represented not as homogeneously masculine but rather as bi-gendered (masculine and feminine).¹⁰ On the other, “ironically, some queerphobic xenophobic violent acts by Hindu nationalist activists simultaneously have the effect of queering their victims and queering the perpetrators themselves.”¹¹ In fact, by castrating Muslim men, Hindu nationalists inadvertently queer *both* the Muslim men in question – who become eunuchs – *and* themselves – who become “makers and rapists of eunuchs”. So, Hindu nationalism deals with queerness by three different and un-homogeneous mechanisms: xenophobic queerphobia, queerphobic xenophobia and the less obvious and sometimes puzzling one, that is queer inclusion. At the end of her article, Bacchetta asks the fundamental question of a full citizenship for Indian queers. She underlines how the exclusion of queer subjects is not only a prerogative of India, but it is wide present even in western contexts. Getting over both these unmotivated forms of exclusion and the similarly unmotivated coercive inclusions of queer subjects is the first step towards a genuinely inclusive and empowering politics.

⁹ In 2009, however, the Delhi High Court stated that homosexuality is not a crime. At the moment the sentence is matter of an appeal to the Supreme Court. It will be a long process, with an uncertain ending, but the scenery can be considered a little less oppressive than in 1999, when Bacchetta wrote the original version of her article.

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that Hindu nationalist ideologists are by that way presented as sexually ambivalent as Gandhi was. This is paradoxical, because Hindu nationalists often accused Gandhi to be not enough virile towards British colonialists.

¹¹ Paola Bacchetta’s private communication.



Two are the core interests on which “Thinking Beyond Gender in India”¹² is based. The first one is the violence intertwined with heteronormativity¹³, the second one is the gender self-perception. In her article, in fact, Ruth Vanita brings the idea of heterosexual monogamy as the best possible way into question. The author explores the numerous and different possibilities to live an emotional and sexual life in a satisfactory way even outside the boundaries of heterosexual monogamy. The struggle with this socio-political construction can use different weapons and lead to divergent realisations. Polygamous marriages, absence of marriage and sexual activity, sexual and emotional relationships different than the heterosexual ones: all these possibilities are envisaged by the author as alternative ways which ought to not to be punished. Even more, these alternative routes must be recognised as valuable choices. The author believes that, at least in many actual realisations, the violence is a constitutive part of the heterosexual monogamy. For this reason, she thinks that the criticism towards this ideology has to be radical. Regarding to the gender self-perception, Vanita affirms that: “[m]ost people are dissatisfied, to different degrees, with being men or women. [...] The categories ‘woman’ and ‘man’ are illogical categories based on certain parts of the body, which may or may not be used to certain predefined ends. [...] In all societies, persons who are dissatisfied with the heterosexual system to the point of not wishing to gain the rewards of fitting into it, have devised different ways of opting out, individually and/or collectively.” For these reasons, heterosexual monogamy is not and must not be considered the only possible way. Vanita, however, does not restrict her criticism to the violence implied in heterosexual relationships. She blames also the human violence against animals. The scholar believes that struggling against every form of structural violence is essential. Therefore, she introduces the vegetarianism and the struggle against men’s violence on animals as the next frontier of feminism.

¹² R. Vanita, “Thinking Beyond Gender in India”, from Vanita, Ruth, *Gandhi’s Tiger and Sita’s Smile: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Culture*, New Delhi, Yoda Press, 2005, pp. 3-13.

¹³ I use this term as a synonym of the phrase ‘normative heterosexism’.



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