

On Decolonizing the ‘Gaze’

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As I think of Decolonizing the ‘gaze’ I have to go back to what colonial or being colonized has meant for me. Certainly, it is not just about western white colonial gaze that is my only concern here’, although it is crucial. We have been colonized also by the hegemonic ideologies of the nation-states, the patriarchal communities we belong to and profit-oriented market. I am trying to think loud about the gaze we have inherited and what we are trying to subvert. I do not have any easy solutions to it nor a perfect roadmap. But what I do know are the reasons we need to reflect and deliberate on these gazes.

The ‘Whys’ that I am sharing with you all emanates from my belief in the ‘personal as political’. I belong to a region in India which is conveniently referred to as the ‘Northeast’ of India and is often stereotyped, homogenized and exoticized. In other words, we are not considered as people belonging to the ‘mainland’. This has definitely played a huge role in my life and the lives of many of us who have experienced perpetual discrimination and harassments in mainland Indian cities like in Delhi. I myself have stayed in Delhi for the past 15 years. For instance, we are derogatorily referred to as ‘chinkis’ – a racist slang and asked questions such as - Are you from China or Thailand or Vietnam? However, more explicit violence is also not absent, there have been instances of rapes and murders too for looking and behaving ‘different’. Women can seldom escape from evaluation of their character if one does not fit a certain dominant image. Although, not in a similar light, when I travel to Sri Lanka, people are often surprised to know that I am from India and not from China or Vietnam or Nepal. However, I am not equating it to facing the same racial connotation as in my own home country but it does intrigue me how this imagery has travelled.

For instance, colonial documents and images often show us so – far off and having cultural and social practices that are at best perceived as exotic. The Indian media, Bollywood - the popular Hindi film industry and to a lot extent researchers and academics have popularized the same and which has travelled across and has been accepted without much reflection and introspection. But for me there is also, another aspect, as especially as a woman and a feminist researcher, I often ask

– ‘What has been our ‘gaze’ on ourselves? I think that this question is a pertinent to us in this entire region irrespective of the geographical locations we might belong to. Let me give you an example:

The community that I belong to is known as Assamese or Axomiya in India and one of our foremost traditional attires for women is something called the *Mekhela-Chador* (basically a two-piece attire). A few years ago, in a conference on one of the organizers who

happened to be an Assamese female anthropologist belonging to the highest Hindu caste, i.e. The Brahmins was highly infuriated by the fact that in my paper presentation I asserted on both Assameseness and womanhood not having any homogenous and essentialist characteristics and imagery. Later, during an informal conversation after the conference, she retorted back to me by emphasizing that the image of the ‘authentic’ Assamese woman is epitomized by a woman garbed exclusively in a Mekhela-Chador. Now, why incident has been important for me is because this woman was not an ‘outsider’ in that sense to the community that I belong to and yet, she wanted to propagate an image of the ‘Assamese’ woman in all its rigidity while tying it up to what authenticity to look like. To be clear, I was not advocating against women’s choice of wearing any traditional attire but rather against the imposition on our bodies to display parochial notions of identity. Many a times, communities (and it can be any community) which have been under-represented runs the risk of mis-representation. This, as a researcher I can definitely say that is because of the constant pressure of making ourselves appealing to funding agencies or in the manner in which we ourselves abide by market strategies. For instance, constantly making only particular kinds of conflicts, agenda of our research or even literature– such as insurgency or ethnic conflicts. Not that these issues are not important but these are not just the only issues. This is especially true when we look at manifestations of patriarchy at different levels.

Hence, I would reiterate that - For a long time, we have been only written about as the exotic objects. It is essential that some of us belonging to these ‘exotic’ locations make an effort to change that. Although there is now a growing scholarship on South Asia in the present times, it still gets caught in the trap of an assumed stereotypical representation of the people and place. Violence, security, fears are common themes under which this region is studied. From the Indian context, as, I have already been mentioned marginalization has been a common experience in terms of the location I belong to. Most of the time we have been understood from the development deficit discourse and as consisting of exotic cultural traditions. It is dominantly viewed as a location

physically and psychologically ‘distant’ (Oinam and Sadokpam 2018: 1). It is not uncommon for many of us to be asked about our ‘exact’ location in the map of India (even within the country itself). But as Feminist Scholar, Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues – “Who we are matters in our struggles, and where we come from matters as well” (Mohanty 2019: 38). Nonetheless, we do know too well that this is not an easy task. Going back to my very own context I view it as the epistemic violence that we have been subjected to.

Having to explain ourselves, our identities and yet constantly trying to reflect on the question – “Who or what is dictating what we know about ourselves?” is a taxing one. Thus, this pursuit of decolonizing the ‘gaze’ or ‘gazes’ seems long and arduous, often accompanied by a level of fatigue and that is the reason my friends, I think that these conversations we are having are crucial. Our solidarities in these conversations matter. Sometimes it may take the form of academic books but also, at other times, it may take the form of poetry or may be art or fiction. As activist and author Arundhati Roy would say - We need to tell our stories. “Stories that are different from the ones we’re being brainwashed to believe. The corporate revolution will collapse if we refuse to buy what they are selling – their ideas, their version of history, their wars, their weapons, their notion of inevitability”.

Now, as in this talk, I am mostly focusing on gender and marginality, I further need to highlight here that for women belonging to our part of the world, to quote Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “a homogenous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed, which, in turn, produces the image of an “average third world woman”. This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: Sexually constrained) and being “third world” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, et cetera)” (Mohanty 1984: 337). This, as we know today has been a very conventional white feminist gaze. Feminist activists, scholars and even women artists in South Asia have perpetually tried to argue that feminism in this region is not merely a by-product of Western feminist movements and theorization. Sri Lankan Feminist scholar Kumari Jayawardena while elaborating on feminism in what can be referred as the ‘non-west’ or the third world, has argued that feminism was not simply an alien category to South Asia, imported from the West. It has an existence beyond the shadow of Western Feminism and the image of the ‘passive female victim of the Third World’. Nonetheless, many a times, we have witnessed that nation-states co-opt this issue of decolonization

and gender, especially when it is related to women. In their attempt to propagate for local and decolonial understanding of women in our part of the world, it culminates in either deification with unrealistic expectations of strength and re-defining rigid gender norms where in women bear the burden of displaying traditional values. In other words, bringing women to the mainstream narrative of decolonization often runs the risk of propagating patriarchal values that assumes of women as strong but also as the ever sacrificing, nurturing being who does not shy away from traditional values which she displays in terms of how she dresses to how she eats to how she behaves and conducts herself in general. For instance, female politicians are expected to affiliation to what are seen as so-called traditional values.

Today, the profit-oriented market has played a major role in bridging this gap between the private (where women were or assumed to be located) and the public which has often been a male dominated space. We are told, as women we are given choice. The choice to choose which brand of lipstick or shampoo to use but not exactly how to live our lives as free individuals and demand our rights. Let me give you the example of advertisements of kitchen appliances. The advertisements of various companies selling kitchen appliances perpetually attempts to show the comfort that lies in being surrounded by gadgets of various kinds. These gadgets, which depend on an uninterrupted supply of water and electricity; impossible to have at least in many parts of South Asia without shelling a large amount of money. One interesting point is that the women in these advertisements might not be always in traditional attires. They are not seen slogging in the kitchen but immersed in a world of abundance and luxury with smiling faces. In such images, women dominate the kitchen landscape with a new consumerist and patriarchal minds set; what Phadke, Khan and Ranade (2011) refers to as “neo-traditionalism”; reaffirming women’s space in the domestic sphere (Phadke, Khan, Ranade 2011: 10). Hence, this image of the empowered ‘good’ woman has modified along with the change in the kitchen space but nevertheless she is expected to be the homemaker; with all the lavish technologies around her; making her the perfect consumer.

But do patriarchy in its different forms and through different mediums only impacted women? Certainly not! As a feminist ethnographer, my experience very well resonates with Chopra, Osella and Osella (2004: 36-59) where-in they quite eloquently elaborates on the limitations of any ethnographic endeavor and particularly in terms of ‘encountering masculinities’ in South Asia. They argue and I quote - “Acknowledging the existence of segregated worlds, especially those that are gendered, it becomes fatally easy to fall into the trap of giving accounts of these worlds in

opposition to one another” (Chopra, Osella and Osella 2004: 38). Both male and female worlds have its interior cleavages with its fragments. “Not all fragments open toward the outsider anthropologist in immediate or identical ways. One fragment may be publicly enacted and on display as it were, while another vanishes” (Chopra, Osella and Osella 2004: 38). Now, as a huge number of literatures suggests, in terms of conceptualizations on masculinity and femininity, colonialism is attributed for creating strict boundaries between masculinity and femininity in most non-western situations (including South Asia). Ashish Nandy (1983) attributes this dichotomous relation between masculinity and femininity to the Victorian notion of gender identity wherein masculinity was viewed in opposition to femininity. He argues that such notions did not exist in pre-colonial societies and ‘softer’ masculinity was not equated with femininity and thus gender identity and its performance was much fluid. However, if we take the example of India (because I am relatively more familiar to the Indian context and which I believe can be applicable to other parts of South Asia too) the colonial project in India was based on juxtaposing the masculine, superior white rulers against effeminate inferior, brown men. Indian men were referred to as effeminate and feeble who have been susceptible to superior masculine rule. In return Indian men, primarily having privileges of class for example retorted back by making women as the epitome of Indian Modernity; a woman who was educated but yet was the ‘queen’ of the kitchen or domestic space.

The burden of patriarchy on how masculinity and femininity are expected to perform has been well demonstrated by scholars like Bourdieu as when he studied the Kabyle House in Northern Africa. Bourdieu’s narrative correlates the women’s place in the household with darkness. As he comments - “The low, dark part of the house is also opposed to the upper part as the female to male” (Bourdieu 1977: 137). For women, it is said that her house is her tomb and that women have only two dwellings – the house and the tomb (Bourdieu 1977: 142). In a similar manner, this spatial difference is not very kind to the men of the community either. “A man who spends too much time at home in the daytime is suspect or ridiculous: he is a “house man” who “broods at home like a hen at roost” (Bourdieu 1977: 137). The men have to carry the burden of demonstrating his masculine ability by constantly putting himself in the gaze of others; should confront and face up the outside world (Bourdieu 1977: 141). That was the viewed as the ‘appropriate’ way of performing his masculinity. In a similar light, Prem Chowdhry’s (2014) study on rural Haryana in India further shows that men who spend more than the “necessary” time (generally spent in eating

a meal) in the *ghar* (house) are called *ghar-ghusnoo* (home bound). He would be taunted as “petticoat bound”, i.e., a male under the influence/domination of females (Chowdhry 2014: 43). We have to recognize the problems in the manner in which we are being colonized and made to believe who we are and what we should be. We have to recognize the intersectional identities on which our life experiences are based. We have to be careful about gazing ourselves from a narrow lens of only one kind of identity. As the world changes around us with the infringement of newer forms of communal politics, corporate capital, anti-migration lobbies but also collective resistance against all of it, we need to keep words such as *Decolonial or Decolonizing* open for further interpretations and translations; that hopefully would free us from the clutches of any kind of parochialism. We have to gaze back and we have to gaze back at ourselves with a renewed sensitivity that is not based on any exclusionary politics.