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Hannah Griggs

Indian Women's Uplift Movements and the Dangers of Cultural Imperialism

WGST-230-01: Global Issues in Women's Studies

Dr. Umme Al-wazedi

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Short Analytical

Too often, we, as western feminists,¹ ignore the complex thoughts, ways of life, and history of the east, painting ourselves as intellectually superior superheroes who rescue helpless, eastern damsels in distress. The west is rational, intelligent, and capable—masculine—while the east is irrational, unintelligent, and incapable—feminine. When western feminists create this dichotomy between east and west, we risk recreating the forms of patriarchy that we seek to destroy. If western feminism assumes an Orientalized dichotomy between east and west, then applying its principles to other parts of the world, such as India, becomes oppressive. As a feminist,² I believe that seeking women’s uplift is the ultimate goal. In order to allow Indian women to assert their agency, western feminists must step back; Indian women and men who seek to empower women must utilize elements of their own traditions, claiming post-patriarchal expressions of Indian culture in the quest for social justice.

Examples of westerners who, filled with evangelistic zeal, attempt to convert and “civilize” foreigners pervade western history. Consider the crusades, colonialism, the Red Scare, Neoliberalism, and the rise Religious Right. By imposing western religious, political, and economic ideals on non-western communities, the west develops a pattern of cultural imperialism. Feminism, however noble its intentions, is no exception. The

¹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty uses the term “Western feminism” in *Feminism Without Borders* to identify certain trends used by writers that “codify others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western” (Mohanty 9). Western feminists, Mohanty argues, do not need to live in the west, so long as they employ the rhetorical strategies that essentialize east and west. Like many ideologies, western feminism has a complex history and multiple articulations; I have chosen to keep “western” lowercase in order to include both feminists who use the strategies previously discussed and ordinary, nonacademic feminists who live in the west. By using the pronoun “we,” I attempt to include myself and other western feminists as my audience. This essay is a plea for western feminists acknowledge how our tradition has historically allowed racism, Orientalism, and patriarchy to suppress the voices of women. However, we can claim elements of western feminism, such as its yearning for social, political, and economic equality, to continue the quest for social justice.

² While western feminists have a history of excluding the voices of people of color, many western feminists are making a conscious effort to overcome this dangerous history. I hope to expand on a growing western feminist discourse of women’s uplift that avoids cultural imperialism and includes the intersectional identities of women.

proselytizing nature of western feminism often results in cultural imperialism. In “A Horror of ‘Isms’: Why I do not Call Myself a Feminist,” Madhu Kishwar, a well-known scholar and advocate for uplifting women, explains: “As products of homogenized western culture, most feminists assume that women’s aspirations the world over must be identical or at least similar, even when their specific problems may be somewhat different” (30). While Kishwar acknowledges that western feminism has worked well within its original context, the ideals of western feminism cannot simply be copied and pasted into the cultural and temporal context of modern India.

As a branch individualism and liberalism that dominates western thought, western feminism has had a unique appeal to American cultural sensibilities. By striving to uplift women,³ western feminism supports liberal values, such as individual rights, freedom, and equality.⁴ However, as an Indian woman working for women’s rights, Kishwar does not identify with western feminism. While she notes that ideologies—or “isms”—play a vital role in helping make individual struggles collective objectives, “isms” assume an inherently time-specific and place-specific agenda. Therefore, the application of time-specific and place-specific agendas of western feminism to countries like India makes dangerous assumptions about the women whom western feminists hope to help. As Sharada Sugirtharajah notes in “Hinduism and Feminism: Some Concerns,” because of the diversity of geographic, social, political, religious, and economic considerations, India cannot fully appropriate western feminism.

³ As I previously mentioned, western feminism has often excluded women of color, perpetuating patriarchal oppression. Nonetheless, I believe that there is hope for western feminism, as we work to include all women in our search for equality.

⁴ This is not to say that women in India do not support liberal values. Instead, I suggest that ideas like individual rights, freedom, and equality are socially constructed. These concepts possess unique and nuanced, socially constructed meanings to different groups of people.

Hinduism, patriarchy, and feminism are not static concepts in India. Because Hinduism is not a monolithic concept,⁵ Sugirtharajah emphasizes the importance of demonstrating a variety of Hindu perspectives on women's issues. Western feminists must remember that many sources—not just written scripture—are significant in understanding the role of Hindu women in India: “Since religion to the Hindu is not restricted only to texts, it is important to explore a variety of non-textual domains... For a creative and critical engagement with ‘feminist’ concerns, we need to go beyond texts...” (Sugirtharajah 104). In order to truly understand Hinduism, western scholars must engage a variety of visual and written texts. Music, dance, art, and folklore are just a few examples of alternative avenues for exploring patriarchy and women's roles in Hindu culture.

Western thinkers, whom Christianity⁶ has historically influenced, often construct texts as infallible authorities. In 1517, Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation, nailed ninety-five theses condemning the Catholic Church to the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther insisted that the Bible, not Catholic hierarchy or tradition, is the absolute authority on matters of Christian doctrine, theology, and practice. Consequently, Protestants are accustomed to using one sacred text as the primary source of Christian thought. Like the Christians who perceive the Bible as unchanging and infallible, Americans⁷ also perceive documents like the Constitution and the Bill of Rights to be unchanging, infallible texts. Therefore, when Christians and other

⁵ In fact, the term “Hinduism” is problematic, for it was given to India by their colonizers to describe native Indian religions. However, because of its widespread use by both western and Indian authors, I have chosen to use it in this essay.

⁶ Here, I have characterized Christianity as a western phenomenon. While I do not intend to ignore eastern articulations of Christianity, my use of terms like “Christian” and “Christianity” in this essay refers to western articulations of Christianity, such as Lutheran Protestantism.

⁷ In this essay, I use the term “American” to refer to people who live in the United States, rather than people who live in South America or other parts of North America.

western thinkers appropriate this concept in order to understand Hinduism, we prevent ourselves from a deeper understanding. Christians and other western thinkers frequently imagine that Hindu women's struggles are identical to their own. By ignoring the cultural differences between Indian Hindus, Christians and Americans, western feminists take away the agency of Indian women and ignore the inherent value of women's lived experience.

Many cultural differences shape the motives, concerns, and goals of Indian women. For Hindus, duty or *dharma* orders family life. *Dharma* has many spiritual meanings for Hindus: duty, righteousness, right behavior, and morality. Sugirtharajah argues that while Hindus support western feminist goals, such as equality and individual rights, *dharma* matters most. For Hindus, the question is not simply how do we uplift women, but "how does one affirm one's individual aspirations in the context of hierarchical relationships?" (Sugirtharajah 100-101). For many westerners, negotiating between the values of community and individuality does not have the same spiritual implications as this discussion does for Hindus. This cultural difference makes it difficult for western feminists—especially secular feminists—to understand Indian women's uplift perspectives.

Besides *dharma*, there are other cultural particularities that make western feminist narratives difficult to employ in India. For example, western feminists have historically faced opposition from men. For this reason, western feminists have been hesitant to include men in the struggle for women's liberation. However, unlike in India where many men have championed women's uplift, western feminists—especially during the second wave—have been inclined to support separatism. Therefore, in the Indian context,

Kishwar explains, “[i]t seems foolish to take an *a priori* position against men, as some separatist feminists insisted on doing...” because Indian men have played a pivotal and positive role in fighting for women’s liberation (Kishwar 41). Ilina Sen discusses the ways in which men have contributed to women’s uplift in "Women’s Politics in India." According to Sen, male leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Kisan Sabhas, Nari Bahini, and Jayaprakash Narayan have stood up for women’s concerns, working to improve the condition of rural women, domestic abuse issues, homelessness, poverty, an oppressive caste system, women’s education, and gender expectations. Sugirtharajah reports that groups of Indian men have fought against *sati* and child marriage and have fought for the right of widows to remarry and for women to own property.

In his crusade against colonial rule, Gandhi expected Indian men to “emulate” values traditionally associated with womanhood: pacifism, selflessness, and perseverance. Men advocating for other men to imitate feminine virtues is virtually unheard in western culture. British colonizers viewed any man who adopted feminine virtues as effeminate and therefore lacking the esteemed virtue of manliness (Kishwar). In contrast, Hinduism encourages men to strive to imitate the virtues of feminine divinities. Nevertheless, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan notes in her article “Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?,” “...the ideological promotion of powerful female models does not contribute to ordinary women’s well-being...” (321). While goddesses like Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Parvati have immense symbolic worth, patriarchy continues to dominate lived Hindu experience. While important goddesses like Kali demonstrates agency in Hindu mythology, ordinary women do not have access to this radical agency in their everyday lives. Unfortunately, Rajan notes, daily life endorses a patriarchal system,

despite the fact that gods and goddesses have equal importance in Hindu scriptures. However, highlighting the multiplicity of Hindu goddesses, Rajan warns against treating Hindu goddesses as though they adhere to a coherent, feminist ideology. Within the same text, one finds contradicting images of divinity, both challenging and reinforcing patriarchy. Sugirtharajah asserts that in the *Ramayana* and in the *Mahabahrata*, both Sita and Draupadi fulfill traditional wifely duties, while simultaneously challenging patriarchal understandings of wifely conduct. Usually, classical versions of these stories dismantle patriarchal norms; however, women's oral iterations more consistently challenge patriarchy.

In order to make sense of these contradictions, Mary E. John argues in “Feminisms in India” that modern Hindus must realize that patriarchy can oppress women in many different contexts—even within a single culture. Region, caste, and language create intersecting classifications of identity and varying types and degrees of patriarchy (John 66). Therefore, in “Kali, the Savior,” Lina Gupta proclaims:

we have reached a point in history when it is simply not enough to recognize and analyze the patriarchal mindset and its effects on our religious and social lives. It is essential for us to seek new forms of religious experiences and expression either through reinterpretation and reconstruction of our traditions or through alternative models of Ultimate Reality that will emphasize as well as include female experiences. (Gupta 15-16)

Acknowledging that Hinduism has not always supported women's uplift, Gupta hopes that modern Hindus can harness goddess images in order to transcend patriarchal interpretations of Hinduism.

Lina Gupta discusses the promise of Kali for the future of post-patriarchal, Hindu feminist thought. Kali dramatizes the struggle for women to assert their own agency within the context of community. Kali is both the destroyer who takes pleasure in devouring her enemies and the mother who nurtures her creation. Kali is both the image of the red-eyed goddess, blood dripping from the corners of her mouth, a necklace of fifty human heads dangling from her neck, and two dead infants hanging from her ears as earrings; *and* the calm, beckoning mother who says “fear not,” breasts overflowing with life-sustaining milk, and arm raised in a gesture of peace. The paradox of Kali—who is terrifying and motherly, destructive and protective, powerful and tender—reflects the paradox of womanhood and of humanity. By embracing each contradicting part of her identity, Kali transcends identity. Kali challenges Hindus to acknowledge death: the imminent loss of, or liberation from, one’s self. Kali is one of many manifestations of Devi, the “Ultimate Reality,” which surpasses all names and forms—including gender.

Scholars like Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu would agree with Lina Gupta. These scholars call for Hindus to use ancient Hindu themes in modern Indian contexts. However, while Gupta calls for Hindus to seek new ways to both modernize and reinterpret religious articulations and experience, Besant and Naidu imagine an ancient Indian, feminist utopia to justify their modern desire for women’s liberation. During the early twentieth century, at the height of the struggle for Indian independence from British colonial rule, Besant and Naidu construct a western feminist “Golden Age” of ancient Indian civilization. Besant, a British feminist, and Naidu, a native Indian, imagine a “past-as-wished-for,” invented by Besant and Naidu’s “convenient selection of the evidence...” guided by “a predetermined intellectual or emotional pattern” (qtd. in

Robinson 78). Making this a classic case of cultural imperialism, the “predetermined intellectual or emotional pattern” to which Robinson refers in *Tradition and Liberation* is western feminism (Robinson 78).

This way of thinking is undoubtedly problematic for two key reasons: first, it prescribes modern Indian thought by idealizing a western reinterpretation of Indian history, and second, it depends on the premise that ancient thought is the only path to true wisdom. We simply cannot reinvent the past in order to fit the needs of the present. In order for modern Indians to uplift women, Indians must take a sober look at their collective past, critically appraising its failures.⁸ As Kishwar, John, and Sugirtharajah argue, privileging the experience of western feminists over the experience of Indian women’s movements stifles the voices of native women. By defining western feminism as an ideal for which all other communities should strive, western feminists essentialize both eastern and western feminisms. This creates an Orientalist, east/west dichotomy where we see the east is seen as the ultimate Other. Categorizing India as Other has had devastating consequences, justifying colonialism and other forms of cultural imperialism.

Like Besant and Naidu, I too would like to imagine Indian history with rose-tinted glasses, exalting an ancient feminist utopia. Unfortunately, this is not how things were. Ancient wisdom does and *should* inform our present; however, when conventional wisdom belies the wisdom gained in the years since our ancient past, change becomes necessary. An awareness of both ancient and modern wisdom must motivate our quest for social justice. As Gupta argues, Indian history need not be perfect for modern Indians to learn from it. With the light that only comes from the passage of time, we must, as a

⁸ Likewise, western feminists should not romanticize first wave feminism, ignoring the ways in which the women’s suffrage movement reinforced racism and patriarchy.

collective human community, denounce our mistakes and uphold our moments of virtue. Indian and western feminists cannot be too hard on the past, but we also cannot be too easy. We must be fair, presenting the past as accurately as we are able. Only then can western feminists begin to understand and support Indian women's movements. Only then can Indian women's movements reevaluate elements of their own traditions as they seek to uplift women.

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