

Introduction

Indian Values in Diaspora: Womanhood

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DESI is a multidisciplinary, peer-reviewed journal in English and French dedicated to the study of the anthropological, political and cultural productions of the *desi*, or *pravasi*, community. Indian issues, diasporic realities, transnational methodologies.

The third issue of *DESI* is dedicated to the engagement of social, anthropological and artistic questions regarding womanhood in the context of the Indian diaspora.

Womanhood is a central component of the ideological construction of conservative 'Indian values' which are often opposed to 'Western values', supposedly undermining the core principles of unchanging age-old traditions and debilitating the Indian social body. Moreover as Chakravarty (1989) and Nandy (1983) have demonstrated, Western Orientalist tradition produced an ideology based on a selective collection of traditional Brahmin literature that legitimized already established British and European conceptions of masculinity. Indeed, thanks to William Jones' 1796 translation of *The Institutes of Manu*, European scholars and colonizers could find descriptions of the position of women in a traditional, Oriental society:

148 In childhood must a female be dependent on her father ; in youth on her husband; her lord being dead, on her sons (...) : a woman must never seek independence.

149 Never let her wish separate from her father, her husband or her sons. (...)

164 A married woman who violates her duty which she owes to her lord, brings infamy on herself

in this life, and in the next shall enter the womb of a shakal, or be afflicted with elephantiasis and other diseases, which punish crimes¹

Women and womanhood were thus further marginalized, creating the conditions for enduring forms of misogyny. As Edward Said (1978) pointed out, the discourse of 'orientalising the Oriental' was a form of deployment of imperialism promoted by a monolithically masculine subject establishing a set of polarities, defining thus the nature of the scrutinized Oriental as different, inferior and passively feminine. Studying Indian values from an Orientalist point of view was therefore a gendered issue, a system of domination and subjectification that persisted in the post-colonial period.

Nowadays, the growing visibility of Indian women in the public realm has proved to be a pertinent question for the Hindu nationalist movement in India, a major fixation in today's Indian politics and social realities and the Indian diaspora provides its share of support, or challenges. On the one hand, the erosion of the joint family system and the growing visibility and assertiveness of women in the public realm have indeed troubled large segments of the urban middle classes which identifies these changes as the unwelcome effect of the Westernization of Indian society. Indian values should therefore be upheld both in the homeland but also within the imagined community of the diaspora. Urban and rural Indian women have, thanks to their emergence on the public scene, claimed and legitimized their involvement with Indian society, thus putting into question thanks to their practices the 'reification of their identity' (Fraser, 2000). This form of 'rethinking recognition', and struggle for the recognition of 'love's labour' (Honneth: 1995) in the private sphere became a challenge for the conservative, patriarchal forces of Indian society. Indeed, the Hindu nationalist forces have discovered since the 1980s a considerable constituency for their programme of cultural revival and purification amongst these groups who are seeking security and respectability in a rapidly changing social world. As pointed out by Blom Hansen (1994) the Hindu nationalist movement in India and in the diaspora has tried to confront women's quest for a greater visibility and autonomy in the public realm through a strategy of controlled emancipation.

What is at stake for the emerging, renewed, post-nehruvian hindutva ideology is the purity of Indian society seen as an unpolluted, monolithic body.

1. *Manava Dharma Sastra or the Institutes of Manu, According to the Gloss of Kulluka, Comprising the Indian System of Duties Religious and Civil*, Verbally translated from the Sanskrit by Sir William Jones and Collated with the Sanskrit text by Graves Chamney Haughton, Calcutta: 1796.

And, in a radical move from Nehru's and Indira Gandhi's indifference and sometimes hostility that considered the Indian diaspora as fundamentally un-Indian, hindutva ideology and BJP strategists consider the pravasi community as part and parcel of the rejuvenation of the Indian social body and of the strengthening of core Indian values. The newly rediscovered NRIs and PIOs are invited to join in the cleansing of Indian society, as Narendra Modi's speech for the 2015 Pravasi Bharatiya Divas symptomatically revealed when he invited Indian expatriates to participate in the Clean Ganga campaign (*Times of India*: 2015). Women and womanhood are at the heart of this refurbished definition of Indian identity: they need to be controlled and this surveillance is performed, symbolically but also effectively through strategies of control of the feminine body. Women's bodies are fashioned both for procreation and male pleasure, and this very limited definition of the place of women in society is of course not a novelty but the insistence on gendered hierarchy and the involvement of the diaspora is unprecedented. Time and again the family, the community and the State have experimented methods of controlling and assisting women's reproduction by manipulating their bodies: women are blamed for having too many children or stigmatized for not having one, or even worse, if she chooses not to exercise her reproductive option. Coercive population control policies implemented by the central state, such as compulsory sterilization, uninformed invasive contraceptive measures and clinical trials, were strategies of marginalisation and control of women's bodies that targeted dalits and Muslims. Only the appropriate kind of mother is socially validated: the one who can bear sons within marriage, inside the framework of reproductive hetero-normativity, marriage and childbearing become central to women's sense of wellbeing and personhood and is looked at as women's destiny. Women's reproductive capacity helps the family to maintain caste purity, preserve the family and community name and property, and produce sons as protectors of the nation. This well-groomed role and identity for women is complemented by the State which uses it to fulfil its eugenic agenda of population control. This agenda decides what kind of population is needed for the Indian society and which people do not have the right to be born.

Moreover, in RSS cosmology, Muslims constitute the direst threat to Hindu culture, and the greatest obstacle for the development of a modern Hindu nation and also constitute another point of fixation. The large Muslim minority in India is demonised as the 'other', the disloyal antinational element threatening the fabric of the nation. The discourse concerning

the recuperation of cultural values has found a sympathetic ear among the middle class, but in its populist form, the discourse centres on the fears, stereotypes and prejudices regarding the Muslim minority and has provided a mass base for the many different organizations in the RSS family. Women are always under pressure to conform to family, society and community expectations. In India, the family moulds women into the ideal roles of dutiful wives, mothers and daughters. The family becomes the matrix where the material body is disciplined and socialised; cultural assumptions of womanhood are reproduced through stipulations and the female body becomes a site of social control. The female body has also been targeted as a metaphor for nation and community.

Women's bodies not only represent honour, but it is the symbolic marker of the boundary between 'us' and 'them', Hindus and Muslims, still perceived as the radically alien, un-Indian minority (as opposed to Christians, Jains or Sikhs, or even the microscopic Parsi community, which are perceived as blending within the fabric of Indian society). Caste and religious differences are drawn to produce dichotomies of otherness and power hierarchies among women: they become the carriers of a vital traditional culture and are compared to Bharat Mata, symbolizing both the Hindu nation and the mother. A woman's honour then represents the nation's honour (*stree ka samman, rashtra ka samman*) and it has to be safeguarded at any cost. The glorification of motherhood is repeatedly used by the right-wing nationalist parties of India, stressing women's role as ideal mothers who bear (Hindu) sons for the nation. The religious marking of the female body, the nation's definition as female/mother, the gendered production of the relationship between land and women's bodies, are all defined as controlling systems. The ideal family is Hindu, and is presented as the ideal family according to State norms, while the Muslim family is castigated as mindlessly producing offsprings. As a West Bengal BJP leader from Birbhum (*India Today*: 2015) declared:

Hindu women should have five children. I would like to tell my Hindu mothers and sisters that if they don't have five children, in future there will be no balance in India. Don't misunderstand me. If my Hindu mothers and sisters don't have five children, hardly any Hindus will be left in India. To protect Hinduism and Sanatan Dharma it is necessary for all Hindus to give birth to five children.

The Hindu women's wombs are therefore a major symbolic and political issue in what is presented by RSS and BJP leaders as a virtual clash of civilization in the Indian homeland, and the Hindu women from the diaspora are also called upon to stand up to the consequences of what is perceived as the Muslim demographic time bomb.

Indeed, during the latest Indian general elections of 2014, the place of 'involved women' (BJP Manifesto: 2014) and the corollary definition of 'womanhood' held a marginal yet eloquent place in Narendra Modi's political platform. In BJP ideology, 'womanhood' is perceived through the traditional, prescriptive and unproblematic prism of a patriarchal order that harks back to a mythologised ahistorical past. As opposed to Nehru's vision of modernity and of Indian national identity, based on a secular (i.e. pluralistic) approach to the question of communalism, hindutva ideology, as outlined by the BJP in its political manifestoes, seeks to exclude its non-Hindu members from the Indian social and civil body. Therefore, once more, the non-assimilative minorities – namely the Muslim minority – would be literally disqualified from taking part in the creation of an imagined national community. The notion that the community shares only one single national culture, one common blood as it were, is fundamental in this new form of Hindu nationalism. The community, like the body, needs to be constantly rejuvenated and strengthened in order to prevent its decay and dissolution at the hands of the centrifugal forces of modernity. The 2014 general election BJP manifesto described under the heading 'Women – the Nation Builder' – between 'Promotion of sports' and 'Education' – 'a series of measures that would 'empower' women such as 'launching a national campaign for saving the girl child and educating her', 'removing any gender disparities in property rights, marital rights and cohabitation rights' and 'mak[ing] police stations more friendly'. These propositions – already present in the Indian Constitution - reflect the worldwide outrage following the 2012 Delhi gang rape and murder of a 23-year-old woman. They are also the continuation of the BJP's programs of support for female education conducted in their Madhya Pradesh stronghold. Yet, these proposals are implicitly aimed at Hindu women alone and serve the interests of the Hindutva agenda that considers women from other religious or ethnic groups as foreign bodies threatening to dilute Indian identity. Women are therefore considered the passive recipients that bequeath the principles of Hindu tradition to future generations.

Indeed, social and anthropological realities and artistic representations tell tales of alienation and violence. Sex-selective abortions, rape as a weapon of retaliation and terror against rival religious groups form the background of the Indian values supported by the tenets of Hindutva. The aim of the following collection of essays is to question the way the Indian diaspora relates to these ancestral values and problematizes its attachment to traditional definitions of womanhood. In other words, the representations produced by the Indian diaspora, in terms of social and artistic discourse, both reinforce and undermine the values set in the homeland. The members of the Indian diaspora – the exploited migrant worker in the Gulf, the middle-class desi wife in a US suburb or the feminist film director – all engage with Indian values and reinterpret them within the frame of the host country and with their specific medium. Since 1999 and the watershed creation of the PIO (Person of Indian Origin), the status of the Indian exile has been both made official by the political institutions of the home country and ethnicized, thus reinventing ‘Indianness’ and Indian values. This new approach by Indian authorities of the desi phenomenon has been characterised by a global, unified approach of a divided, diverse reality. What is unique to this very political definition of the Indian diaspora is its link to the evolution of and importance given to national identity. The Indian diaspora and the home community and its institutions engage in a problematic dialogue around notions of ethnicity, authenticity and memory.

Female self-fashioning in the movies is overwhelmingly centred around the valuation of willing submission to heteropatriarchal norms, showing in film after film the image of the dutiful woman who ‘loves’ to cook and clean, wash and scrub, shine and polish for her husband. This normative femininity normalizes submission to patriarchal and heterosexual norms, with narratives of defiance from this prescriptive script ending with filmic narratives either in death, severe censure, or oblivion. Cinematic representations not only replicated, but also generated normative ideas of femininity. The femininity prototypes explicitly or implicitly promulgate the work of motherhood, and, if not already a mother, the female protagonist is on her way to take her place within compulsory reproductive heteronormality. Agential roles for female protagonists are rare; the convention is to punish within the narrative female refusal of normative femininity. The public sphere is presented as the rightful space of man, and feminine incursions into that space are devalued or challenged through rather obnoxious examples of misogyny

in a large part of Indian cinema. The return of womanhood into the private sphere, however, is valued and celebrated as both correct and necessary. If films serve as cultural repository, some newly produced films (*Trivandrum Lodge*, 2012; and *22 Female Kottayam*, 2012, for instance), generate strong counter-memories to the dominant script of normative femininity within the Indian public sphere, which mainstream film production has thus far stabilized. By placing female productive and reproductive tasks at the centre of the filmic space, these films generate critiques of heteropatriarchal monopolies on female chastity, monogamy, and maternity.

Similarly, the 'accented cinema' (Naficy, 2001) of diasporic, cosmopolitan directors Deepa Mehta and Mira Nair explores new avenues of engagement with the issues of Indian values. The political violence orchestrated by Hindu nationalist leagues on the occasion of the shooting of Deepa Mehta's *Elements* trilogy is a perfect illustration of the tensions created in the homeland when a diasporic director of Indian origin engages with Indian identity issues. Like Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* which received international recognition, Mehta's production is an insider's point of view on Indian society and Indian values from the point of view of the exile. Both female directors' exilic condition was the main accusation levelled at them by Indian critics: their films were allegedly the product of a feminist ethnography that posited itself as a legitimate Oriental gaze fabricating a truncated and merchandised image of India following the aesthetic and representational codes of the West. In other words, for these 'facile interculturalists' (Bharucha: 1989) their in-betweenness is a subject of contention and undermines their legitimacy as authentic Indian film directors. Furthermore, Mehta's and Nair's realistic approach is deemed touristic and voyeuristic, inaccurate depictions of the lives of Indian subalterns. Of course, for Western audiences, Mehta's and Nair's films are perceived as authentic descriptions, with almost the authority of documentaries. Indeed the use of Hollywoodian tropes of sympathetic characters, linear narrative, the use of a Western director of photography (Giles Nuttgens in Mehta's case), directing actors to act naturalistically, non-diegetic musical score, and filming on authentic locations as opposed to studios, point at a form of transnational, globalized cinema without any specific location.

The ten contributions of this issue of *Desi* offer a transdisciplinary approach to the issues raised by Indian values in diaspora. The first perspective chosen by the collaborators of the journal is an anthropological and sociological

approach. In an interview with Anthony Goreau-Ponceaud, urban anthropologist Marie Percot details the main questions connecting Indian values and diasporic women. Gail Hickey offers a study of the chronology of acculturation of U. S. Asian Indians in a suburban context through personal narratives of diaspora. Emilie Goreau-Ponceaud also based her work on a series of interviews with female returnees in Pondicherry and their ambivalent relationship with their home country and its values. The second part focuses on cinematic productions: Marie-Eve Lefebvre questions the turning point in Bollywood cinema when the figure of the desi became a positive character as they become 'Indianized', re-acclimatized and lose part of their alienating Western ways and values. The impact of this globalised cinema is also explained by Melanie Le Forestier's contribution on diasporic female directors whose representation of women challenges their representation as guardians of Indian values: examples are taken from the cinema of Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta and Nisha Pahuja. Engaging with Indian values through personal narratives is also the subject of Virginie Mesana's article. The contribution of female directors to the values underpinning the Indian diaspora is examined, together with the use of subversive 'personal narratives'. Paul Veyret's article studies Deepah Meeta's *Water* and how its production provoked outrage in sections of Hindu nationalist leagues. Its aesthetics and feminist tactics are analysed. The third part of this publication focuses on other cultural productions of Indian women in diaspora. Jennifer Randall studies the emerging occurrence of women writers integrating Western academic circles and using this opportunity to write back 'to various powers structuring their country of origin and to address the reasons for their migration'. Florence Nowak studies the cultural representation of women in Garhwali music and the circulation of the repertoire within exiled communities. Nicolas Nercam concludes this collection with his analysis of Zarina Bhimji's installations which deal with the migrant artist's position in the 'third space' of creation and her approach of the trauma of diaspora.

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