The Marginal/ (the) Minority : Everyday experience of Anglo-Indian Women

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Abstract: *Every day is lived by all, experienced by all but is very individualized. These every day of many individuals when looked at from a distance serve to form an idea of every day of a group/community. The everyday experience of a group is not a collection of all every day of the members. The 'everyday' lived by individuals are discrete yet continuous, continuous yet fractured. Such continuous memory but discrete existence is the basis of the social life of a community. This paper will look into the everyday experience of women of a community in India namely the Anglo-Indian. The Anglo-Indian is a community recognized in India as a minority in the Constitution and socially as marginal. The voluminous presence of the community in the colonial period has slowly waned into the numerical absence of the community from the social scene and a slow and steady decline in wielding power and authority. The women of the community are doubly marginalized, dominated and relegated to the periphery both from within and outside the community. This paper will focus on the lived experience of these women vis-à-vis their community and the wider society.*

Keywords: Anglo-Indian Women, Marginality and the Anglo-Indian, Anglo-Indian community, Stereotype and Anglo-Indian Women

Introducing the Anglo-Indian

Victoria Stoneham walks past Babughat[1] reciting her favourite lines from Shakespeare's 'King Lear.' The suffocating gloom in her heart tries to come out but it does not. Her heart pumps fast as tears roll down her cheeks though cannot be seen as she is framed by a long shot. She is a character in a film. She is unreal yet so close to heart, so near to us that we often do not see her.[2] She is an Anglo-Indian woman, old, retired school teacher, betrayed by her

student Nandita, a Bengali Hindu. It is not an account of communal hatred. It is how it is framed for Victoria. She is independent yet reliant on others in her vulnerabilities. She is strong enough to overcome all odds yet soft to trust others easily. Her student whom she started loving as a companion in times of her loneliness when all her friends and relatives had migrated to other countries of choice had let her down. She had stayed back despite many persuasions from friends and family. She convinced them that this was her home, her land, her everything. She could not take up the call to leave the land where she had grown up. But does a home signify a piece of land only? Isn't it the relations that we hold dear that create a home? It is her relationship with Nandita and her friend Samaresh that had given her the support to withstand a 'call of the blood.' She came to know a few minutes ago that the friendship among the three of them was false. Nandita and Samaresh had used her space, her trust, her love while she thought they were her friends, her people to trust. But this breach of trust is not new to her! The Anglo-Indians had been betrayed in the past. The British had let down the community by not recognizing their contribution and love for the British ways and culture.

You may not find Victoria Stoneham anywhere near you but she is a representative of a generation of Anglo-Indian women. Now, why did the director of 36 *Chowringhee Lane* (1981) select an Anglo-Indian woman as a protagonist in the film? Is it because she is a woman herself? Or is it because the plot could push the audience more subtly if the protagonist were a woman? Is it because the vulnerabilities of a woman could be better expressed and help to arouse the audience's emotions more subtly? Does the self-proclaimed feminist director, a woman herself, think that women, in general, are soft-natured, vulnerable, need care and support? The answer is unknown but the Anglo-Indian in the film, the central character was drawn as one such woman who had shades of varying and opposite characteristics. She was a round character in the film, sometimes a true representative and sometimes too dramatic.

In contrast to Victoria, a woman part of fiction, Suzette Jordan is real. She is the 'Park Street Rape' victim recorded as such in 2012. She is middle-aged and lived with her two daughters, an unemployed single mother. Besides her daily struggles to meet all ends, she is fun-loving, flirtatious, commendable and happy. She also had experienced a breach of trust. Her acquaintance had forcefully penetrated her body and invaded her sanctity. She was left on a fateful night on the road after being gang-raped by five men. She managed to report to the police. The initial reluctance of the police to acknowledge that it was a 'fact' was later recorded. The interesting turn is that she was termed the 'Park Street Rape Case' but she revealed her identity to the world in 2013 and marched on the road to protest against rapes and murders. She said, "Why should I hide my identity when it was not even my fault? Why should

I be ashamed of something that I did not give rise to? I was subjected to brutality, I was subjected to torture, and I was subjected to rape, and I am fighting and I will fight".[3] This showed her resolve, resilience and strength to fight back. She might have cried in private on being violated but the world saw her resistance. Quite a number of women might have been raped, surrendered, and remained unidentified, succumbed to the pressure a woman faces after being a victim of such acts but she rose to defy the structure that questioned her role as a mother or her status as a woman. She died in a nursing home suffering from meningitis in 2015. Her everyday struggles with her daughters as a single mother were not different from any other mother. She could not pay the tuition fees at times but managed to meet all ends from the part-time jobs that she took up. But what made her different was that she partied the whole night, wanted to have some fun even if she was at the margin of her survival. She could see the brighter side of life every time her dreams got clouded.

I am writing or presenting before you women of a particular community who are labelled as 'different' for being brought up in a different culture unfamiliar to us. They are separated distant, isolated cases because we do not find similarities or familiarities with each. We both have created the divide. They being part of the once ruling class had pitied us. 'We' formed the *other* against the western, fairer, powerful (part of the ruling community) women. After India gained independence, we being part of the majority by sheer numbers had outlived them in dominance and also because we had gained independence as a choice. In independent India, the Anglo-Indian community (and its woman) is a member of a minority group recognized by the law. She is recognized as one who was born to a European father and Indian mother or European parents domiciled within the Indian Territory.

I met Sonia, an Anglo-Indian girl in her early thirties. A secretary to a Director of a reputed Company she lived in relative poverty. Her good networks, which Anglo-Indians usually thrive on and make use of, helped her to get the job. But it was increasingly being difficult for her to go to the office every day by-passing the young men at the corner of the lane she lived. They continuously give her calls; often tease her by calling her a 'memsahib'. She knows she is not a 'sahib' or a woman of a *sahib*[4] but she is a country-born, an indigenous young woman. She is not ignorant of the connotation of the word 'memsahib' in the colloquial language. She knows it as a derogatory term to mean someone who had the authority to rule over a household reproducing power as the colonial regime. She wants to move on in life and get away from the colonial hangover that her parents and grandparents suffer from. She is an Indian and believes to be one. But others in her locality often question her about her *Indianness* and love for the country she was born in.

The 'kalo mem' Mary Ann in contrast and is a character in a representational song by Anjan Dutta. Mary Ann, a fictitious character in the

song is an Anglo-Indian old woman who moves before our eyes in a hand-pulled rickshaw in Kolkata. She was adored by the Indian men who were followers of western music and culture. She has her miseries, her loneliness but fights them with the compassionate blessings of her worshipped God. She grows old but her admirers remember her as in her youth and moan for her in the song, remembering her as their lost love. Mary Ann was an object of love for being the 'other woman.' Here she is not teased as being 'white' — a 'memsahib' but her country-born tanned colour is acknowledged in the song as 'kalo mem' the black-skinned daughter of an engine driver.[5] The song is a longing for lost love. The object of love – the Anglo-Indian woman is fairer in comparison to the *desi* woman but darker in contrast to the European.

The characters in fiction and films and the real both are a part of a community and its representational fiction. They are valorized, pitied, adored and loathed as Anglo-Indians. The stereotype image of an Anglo-Indian woman is fixed in the minds of 'others' in India. The women are considered western by Indian standards. The idea of an Anglo-Indian woman is ingrained as one who is sexually open, western and different from any conceptions of women in India. The film *Julie* for example represents an Anglo-Indian woman as a sexual object, a frivolous, western woman who becomes an unwed mother. The concept of unwed motherhood could never be portrayed in a non-Anglo-Indian woman in India. The Anglo-Indian was the only one who could be shown as she was considered as one who could become one and without any protest from the community.

Going Further

The stereotype of an Anglo-Indian woman is a result and a factor of the *othering* that the women of the community have faced from the other different communities in India. It is not only because they were different but also for the reason that they were a minority on whom certain images could be easily scripted. When we talk about marginality and marginalization the question that becomes important is marginal to which context? The Anglo-Indian community and its women are considered marginal to the domination of the other community and their women who are considered to be the point of departure for the Anglo-Indian. It means the community must face domination and experience resistance from the other communities in India.[6] Rejection of the power of the centre is the essential reference point for understanding marginalisation not only politicises the process of resisting and responding to marginalisation; it also challenges marginalization. Ironically, responding to this challenge would undermine the relevance of marginalisation as an analytical category, and strengthen the need for analysis of specific channels and patterns of oppression, alienation and inequality.[7] Social scientists have embraced new dimensions of poverty to depict interconnected negative consequences affecting individuals in different

kinds of societies. According to the World Bank, poverty is thus still dependent on income (measured by the concept of the poverty line) but is not exclusively a matter of material deprivation. It is rather a "denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity."[8] The lines between poverty and exclusion are blurred and it is a matter of controversy whether one term is more fitting than the other. Fisher (2011) thus argues that the term 'exclusion' can potentially provide a wider scope to the analysis of the dynamics producing a situation of disadvantage.[9] He emphasises that different forms of exclusion may or may not be related to actual lack of means (usually described as poverty), as people can be excluded based on their race, age or gender, etc. By contrast, Sen considers this clear-cut distinction between poverty and exclusion invalid and the concept of social exclusion essentially redundant.[10] Sen argues that the analysis of relational issues is already practiced in a number of classical poverty studies. In this context, social exclusion has been defined as "the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities available to the majority of people in a society."[11] This definition has been complemented by others with slightly different foci, so that exclusion remains a flexible, concise and value-laden onomasiological term.[12] Its multilayered dimensions and the plurality of interpretations are not conducive to securing general agreement among scholars. There is hardly any consensus beyond the generally negative use of the term, and even less about the production of exclusion, its manifestations and its reproduction. Thus, so far, a generally accepted understanding among scholars seems to point to exclusion being both a process and condition, one resulting from a combination of intertwined forms of social, economic and power inequalities and leading to disadvantage, and relegated to the systematic denial of individuals' or communities' rights, opportunities and resources.

In the sociological field, the concept of marginality was first introduced in 1928 with an essay by Robert Park titled "Human Migration and the Marginal Man"[13] in which Park described the cross-pressures experienced by immigrants through the overlapping involvement in different cultures. The resulting lack of integration and the status as an "outsider" concerning dominant cultures, Park termed "Marginality". This strand of work was later continued by Stonequist (1937) who studied hybrid identities caught "between two fires."[14] Since that time the use of the term "marginality" has flourished and the concept has been broadened and diffused.[15] (Billson 2005: 33). Billson has suggested, that marginality has been applied in sociology in three different kinds of ways: a) as cultural marginality, referring to the dilemmas of cross-cultural identities and assimilation, and b) as social role marginality, describing the tensions which occur when an individual is restricted from belonging to a positive reference group, c) as structural marginality, referring to political, social and economic powerlessness and disadvantage. It is especially the latter strand of research which has gained

the most attention in the last decades, and here concepts of power and oppression are regularly fused with more "culturalist" ideas of "outsiderness" to create a generally accepted contemporary definition of "marginality" as the lack of power, participation and integration experienced by a group, or a territory. Leimgruber (2004), to give but one example, has suggested the following: a) significantly lower per capita incomes, b) low infrastructure equipment, c) cultural isolation d) difficult natural conditions.[16] It should be noted that, compared with more sociological approaches, this definition focuses on conditions rather than relations.

The third group of discussions circling the term "marginality" needs to be placed in the context of leftist Latin-American Debates in the 1960s and 1970s.[17] The background was dramatic urbanisation which was driven mainly by the growth of both informal settlements (faceless, barrios, ranchos) and a workforce which was occupied outside the established economies. In order to grasp the *outsiderness* and exclusion of these immigrants from established urban societies, economies and political structures, several Latin American theorists used terms like "marginality", "marginal masses", or "marginal settlements" for the places the "marginal masses" were inhabiting. Theoretically, this argument was closely linked to Dependency-Theories which analysed the partial and dependent industrialisation of Third-World countries. Given these different roots, it is obvious that the term "marginalization" has unfolded with multiple meanings. Consequentially, it has three fundamentally different meanings: a) underdevelopment, lack of resources, distance, b) relation, oppression, closure and c) lack of cultural integration, lack of adaption to norms (i.e. "culture of poverty", "urban underclass").[18]

It also takes away any sense of the subjective experience of the individual and confers upon them the identity of 'other'. This is not to fail to recognise that marginalisation arises from the actions of others whether deliberate[19] or inadvertent, whether individually[20] (as can be the case in bullying) or collectively. Nor is it to negate the responsibility that we hold towards others which is part of our shared humanity. There are two assumptions inherent within the concept of a marginalised group: firstly, stereotypical assumptions that there is a shared experience which can be associated with people who share certain characteristics (for example, poverty) – that of marginalisation; and secondly, there is a shared conceptualisation of whatever it is they are being marginalised from – 'an ideal.'[21] It is how individuals interpret their life experiences (which in itself is framed through their experience) and how they perceive their lives about others and the 'ideals' which are a representation of cultural norms, expectations and values, shaped by and through political forces and the systems and structures (including legal systems) of society, which will determine whether or not they will experience their lives as marginalised. In summary, marginalisation may be a matter of degree, the

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extent to which it is experienced or not by an individual filtered through their life experiences and their interpretation of such; it has an affective dimension; it is contextually related (situated in time, place and culture represented in norms, values and expectations); it may be temporary or become internalised and global; it arises through the actions of others, whether intentional or inadvertent and is representative of unequal power relations; it may be formal (as represented through Government policies and legislation) or informal; it manifests itself in many different ways and can be understood at the individual, social and societal/political levels.

The Anglo-Indian was born in India. It has a history of more than five hundred years. Mainly concentrated in urban spaces firstly then the community sparingly had spread to railway colonies (it was an important centre for employment for the Anglo-Indian besides post and telegraph, Police, army)[22] but now has spread over the globe, especially to Eurocentric and Commonwealth countries in the west. The population in India is a recognized minority, socially marginal and spread over the metropolitan cities. In Kolkata (the reference point for this article) the Anglo-Indians are ghettoized into definite pockets of the city space concentrating in some localities relatively poor and slum-centred. This population has in-migrated within the city leaving behind posh localities to the marginal fringes. This was due to their inability to cope with the rising standards of living and the fresh demands of reframing the central city space. The community has become marginal in the city of Kolkata both in visibility and dominant prowess in executing for itself a locality called its own. The Anglo-Indian also keeps to its language (English) especially true of the older generation that had witnessed the Independence of the country. The conforming standards of community living are still dictated by western styles often concentrated and kept for family occasions. Women in particular have not out-grown this style statement. Men in contrast have always been western in dressing and presenting themselves which they have not changed. The social interaction of women, in particular, is limited to family, friends and close acquaintances.[23] The culture of conforming to the norms of the community is practiced with a few deviances. Therefore resistance and protest are also very limited rendering the community identity of docility. The case of Susan Jordan was an individual protest where the community never responded to her resistance neither in support nor in any objection to her claim of identity in public. The stereotyped identity of an Anglo-Indian woman as a frivolous, sexual object was never broken though Susan had tried to give it a jolt. The Anglo-Indian is still framed as ever sad, lonely, isolated, frivolous, sexed and charming. So Sonia is a lone fighter, as is Susan. They fight their own battles; prove their strengths to none but themselves. But the popular image of the Anglo-Indian woman is the stereotyped imagery of sad and lonely, alienated and marginal Victoria Stoneham and Mary Ann: representatives of the Anglo-Indian woman in the minds of the dominant.

In conclusion

Every day for these women is a social construction. They are viewed in binary opposition. The one side has these ever-weeping women who are entrenched in a stereotype of misery and betrayal and on the other are women who are ever flirtatious, over cheerful in their misery. The Anglo-Indian woman is fast breaking this stereotype and moving out of the cleavage of any pigeonhole, breaking free of the burdens that history had on them. This free Anglo-Indian woman is also unfamiliar to us since we the *other* are active to bracket them in a label called 'The Anglo-Indian stereotype.'

Notes and References

1.   A place in Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

2.   She is visible in the metropolitan city of Calcutta (Kolkata) now. She is a part of the city space, living in old mansions rented out to her family perhaps in more than fifty years back. But she lives alone. The film portrays such a character, an old Anglo-Indian woman who lives by herself. In this way the portrayal is representative of the real world. But her sorrow seems invisible! Her loneliness does not mean that she is a loner. She has a family, her group of friends. She is portrayed in the minds of the people of her city as a loner/loser. Because her ways of living is different from the others in the city space, not now but long back she is marginal and part of the recognized minority: the Anglo-Indian.

3.   Refer to Wikipedia.org/wiki/Suzette Jordan, 30 November 2021 at 8.30 a.m.

4.   Is a variation of the word Sahib an Arabic term, a title of a woman in position of authority; A white foreign woman of high social status living in India, especially wife of a British Official

5.   The Anglo-indian community born out of sexual union of A european father and an Indian mother has inherited skin colours of the European and the Indian with its own racial mixing of other characteristics. It is often described that the skin colour of children in any Anglo-Indian family ranges from White to scooty black. There are evidences in history where one sibling could be passed as a european while others could not and even were depreived of many opportunities offered to children of European fathers in colonial India. For details refer to Sen., S., (2017), *Anglo-Indian Women in Transition: Pride, Prejudice and Predicament*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmilan

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