Images of Oriental Women in the Travel Writings of 17th Century India

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West uses the East as an inverted mirror,
Imagining them to be everything the west is not
Edward Said

The ambivalence of the West towards East is age-old. This romantic sense of Eastern cultures is presented as alien, exotic and sometimes dangerous. The rich culture, superior civilization and ancient wisdom of Orient have inspired many Westerns. But on the other hand, the threats of its monstrous mysteries, absurd religion hailing from its stagnant past have abhorred at least many. The Orient has been dominion of horde and despots having exotic sensuality. Encountering the East has been significant for the self-image of West producing identities ranging from decadent European modernity to the concepts of cultural, racial and moral superiority.

The oriental women have been seen as unlimitedly sensual, lacking in rationality and most importantly willing to do
everything. Said claimed that the male conception of the world has made the orientalist discourse “static, frozen and fixed eternally”. Every traveller of seventeenth century commented on the beauty, habits, sexuality, ornamentation, dress, Harem life as well as deprivation and seclusion of Indian women. Their observations are important source of history but these travellers were not the part of indigenous culture so it was very easy for them to denounce the norms of local life. In this paper an effort is made to combine the study of orientalism with an isolated area of feminism. The representation of Asian as “others” to understand the discourse of western orientalism, the depiction of “colonized women” in the same discourse unveils this fact that masculinized writings portray a biased look of feminine history of Medieval India.

The perception of European travellers is quite interesting. According to John Fryer, ‘their women’ are conformable to the wills of their husbands, being truly no more than their chief slaves, dressing the victuals and waiting till their lords have dined, before they eat themselves. John Fryer emphasizes on their subordination to men, a sense reinforced by the use of the possessive pronoun, ‘their women’. The seclusion of women deprives the travel-writer of his essential role as an observer, and also denies him his customary masculine prerogative of possession of women.

Terry says, “if they (women) dishonor their husbands’ beds or being unmarried are found incontinent and filthy, professing chastity rather than they shall want the severest punishment, their own brothers’ hand will be the first against them to take away their lives, for doing so, shall be commended, but not questioned”. Edward Terry carefully distinguishes sexual mores of Oriental women from those of European offering women as a model of eastern chastity. It was the matter of family honours to intact the virginity of women in the East. Travel writings propagate that Moores have “Harems” where a large number of
women were offered for the sake of King's pleasure. But this phenomenon was also attached with Hindus of Elite class that they maintained large harems. Rana Kabbanı has argued that by the Renaissance, the luxurious harems had already become a standard topic of European writings about East.

Niccolao Manucci a Venetian and chief physician to Aurangzeb for more than forty years narrates, “their daughter married even before they have learnt to talk”. He also writes that the normal age for the marriage of the daughter of the Brahmins was four or five years and in some cases, the marriage could be postponed up to ten years of age but never beyond that. Pelsaert writes, “Hindus join their children at the age of only 4 and 5 years”. Ovington says that “Indian married their children at the age of six or seven years”. Careri particularly refers to Muslim women by saying, “Mohammedan marry very young but the idolaters at all ages”. Ovington comes to rescue the practice of child marriage. He defends child marriage prevalent among the Hindus, which he thinks can save men from the “disappointment of fickle mistress.”

“Some of Gentile sects before they feel any great warmth of this amorous passion are by their parents joined together in their infancy, at three or four of age. From which time they endeavor mutually to kindle this tender passion, until the growing years blow it up into a lively flame. And by thousand little tricks and arts of love, they endeavor to stamp their affection upon the infant souls, which like melted wax are pliant and easy to receive the impression, and so they are insensibly captivated by each other's snare.”

The custom to arrange the match was solely at the discretion of the parents or the nearest relatives and friends. The ordinary Indian girls had no choice in the selection of her husband. But it seems that there was a great liberty for girls belonging to high class Rajput families to choose their husbands. The princess of
Rupnagar invited her lover Rana Raj Singh of Mewar to bear her from the impending union with the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. Sometimes, these ladies fixed the price of their hand, Tara bai (daughter of Rao Surthan Rajput Chief) promised to marry the youth who would recover her father's domain Todah from Pathans. Jaimal Raja of Ajmer, the brother of Prithvi Raj won this area for her.

Pelsaert gave a detailed note of a marriage solemnized in an ordinary family of Agra, “Marriage negotiations were usually initiated by the groom's family and when settled, the bridegroom sent a ring to the bride, with his compliments Pelsaert says, she sends in return some betel leaves with a handkerchief or something of the kind though the unfortunate bridegroom is not allowed to meet the lady, still less to see if his future bride is white or black, straight or crooked, pretty or ugly; he must trust his mother and friends. From this time on having much marny-making --- with music and singing --- and this goes on continuously, day and night, with drums, pipes, and other noises. The wedding usually took place a couple of weeks after engagement, to give time for the families to organize the festivities, three or four days before the wedding day, Pelsaert continues, the groom with his parents and their entire clan went to bride's house to the accompany of music bearing large ornamented, wooden dishes full of confectionary, sugar, almonds, raisins and other fruits and also a sum of money, 100 or 1000 rupees --- the money goes towards the expanses of bride's family--- he also provides the bride's jewelry.

Polygamy was the privilege of rich Mohammedans, each of whom kept three or four wives at a time. The co-wives rivalled with each other and used all devices to excel one another and there-by would win the love of their husband. Hindus were monogamous except princes and very wealthy persons. Della Valle writes, “Hindus take but one wife and never divorce her till death, expect for the cause of adultery.”

In the midst of miseries,
Indian women had one blessing: their ease in child bearing. According to Terry, "The women in those parts have a great happiness above all I know, their ease in bringing forth their children; it is a thing common there. One day a woman carries her infant in her body and next day she carries this child in her arm." Linschoten described an extra ordinary incident: one day when he was out on a walk in the fields, feeling thirsty he went into a hut of a "canarin" to drink water. I stopped down and thrust my head at the door, asking for some water, where I espied a woman alone within house, tying her cloth fast about her middle, having a trough full of water, where she stood and wash her child. She had delivered a child without any help. She laid it naked on the ground upon the great Indian fig leaf and she would presently give me water.

In the extreme case if a wife proved to be barren, they had the liberty to marry another one with the consent of the Brahmins. Sometimes the process of separation caused exploitation especially for woman. Manucci writes, "If any Muslim woman objects to living with her husband and goes to lodge a complaint, he (the Qazi) keeps her three days in his house and after that interval he pronounces judgment on the dispute between them just as he thinks the best. No one can demand the reasons for his acts in that respect whether his decision is a good or a bad one." Manucci refers to a case which was decided by Qazi Abdul Wahhab (during Aurangzeb's reign) in his presence. According to his observation, the Chief Qazi of the realm had taken liberty of a woman's sin just only for his lust. Manucci writes that the "husband had to pay compensation to the divorced wife for her maintenance." According to Manucci, "when the husband is tired of his wife he gives her a straw called Turunto (turuntu)". By giving of this straw, the marriage is broken. This custom was prevalent in Sudras in Mughal India.
"To avoid such a fate, a widow had to lead a low life, sometimes as a prostitute, she associated with a creature so degraded who is accounted utterly infamous, because of the dishonor". A Muslim widow observed "Iddat" strictly; Fryer refers to a special custom observed by the Muslim widows in Mughal India. "The widow once a moon went to the grave with her acquaintance to repeat the doleful dirge, after which she bestowed holy way a kind of sacramental water and entreats their prayer for the soul of the departed".

It was a custom in Indian society that a widow was remarried in the family of her husband, especially with his brother. Manucci writes, "Since the law thus directed that the wives of a dead elder brother belonged to the living young brother". Emperor Aurangzeb had great respect for widows. He made fine arrangements for them into their respective apartments, which were given the name “Suhagpura”.

The custom of Sati (widow burning) was highlighted by every traveller who had visited India in 17th century to determine the barbarism of Indian society. Edward Terry and Alexander Hamilton appreciated this custom by glorifying it; Terry admires the sacrifice of widow due to their love and passion for their dead husband Terry wrote a piece of verse in the praise of sati:

Her breathless husband then she takes
In fold arms; this done she makes
Her humble suit to the flame to give
Her quick dispatch; she cannot live
Her honour dead. Her friends thence come,
Look on, as if there martyrdom
And with content are hither led
At once to view her marriage bed

He also condemns them in the same manner since this act of sacrifice is sinful from Christian point of view. Terry’s patriarchal
bias and religious standpoint made his opinion ambiguous. From the patriarchal point of view, sati is heroic custom since it is love and loyalty towards her dead husband. The glorification of sati from patriarchal view complicated the discourse of orientalism, discourse of Christian belief and heresy, in which sati is represented as “barbaric”. Henry lord argues that sati would let a woman, “give an honor out of the infamy cast upon their sex”. He observes that sati was in practice because of “Indian women’s disloyalty to their husbands; who in former times, by secret means, ultimately poisoned them, to enjoy their paramours: the Rajahs (kings), therefore, to restrain this practice, procure the Brahmans to make it an act of religion to interdict second marriages to the women, and after the death of their husbands, the women should no longer survive. So they might become more careful of their preservation”. Terry, use of the heroic mode makes for highly ambivalent description. Indeed European travellers display a contradictory reaction to sati as an act of barbarianism and heroic sacrifice.

According to Pelsaert, in Agra (reign of Jahangir) sati occurred only two or three times a week. The normal practice of sati was for the widow to burn herself with her husband’s body on the same pyre; if the husband died in battle as in the case of Rajputs, “their women immolate themselves with still great alacrity on receiving the turban sent to them as a sign of their husband’s death, with it in their hands they are cremated”. Sati was usually voluntary, “this deed was done not under compulsion but out of sheer love, Pelsaert states in appreciation. Bernier records a young widow of only twelve years who was forcefully sacrificed in Lahore. Bernier writes of sati as alternately heroic, sacrificial or socially conditioned. Ambivalence is of course inherent in the European male response to this act. There is the patriarchal appeal of sati as the ultimate demonstration of wifely submission of chastity. The figure of sati functions as a potent emblem of patient female sufferings.
Manucci informs, “when the widow mounted to the funeral pyre, her consent was re-confirmed before lighting the pyre. Then, woman is spoken of her name and three times distinctly she is called on to say whether she consents to go to heaven; to this she replies in affirmative.”

Bernier had a different opinion because he was eye witness of some cases of Sati. He writes that the poor little creature appeared more dead than alive when she approached the dreadful pit; the agony of her mind cannot be described; she trembled and wept bitterly; but three or four of the Brahmins assisted by an old woman who held her under the arm, forced the unwilling victim toward the fatal spot, seated her on the wood, tied her hands and feet, lest she should run away; in that situation the innocent creature was burnt alive. In Bernier encounter with a would be sati, he manages to dissuade her from burning with a terrible image. Bernier steals the widow’s glory to become the hero himself.

Della valle remarks, “Women burnt themselves with their dead husbands at their own choice and sometimes women are burnt against their own will, their relations resolving to have it so for honor of the husband; and that they have been brought to the fire in manner by force.” Manucci narrates, “Some women died with their husband’s body in their harem without making a sign or a movement.”

Tavernier explains two main reasons of widow burning. “First by dying with their husbands, they will live again with them in some other part of the world with more glory and more comfort than they have previously enjoyed. Second, she survived she could not remarry” her hair is shaved off; she despoils herself of all the ornaments; she removes from her arms and legs the bracelets; she remains for the rest of her life without being considered and worse than a slave in the place where previously she was
mistress." This miserable condition caused her to burn herself in the funeral pile of her husband.

Another factor, Bernier notes, was cultural conditioning, "the effects of early and deep rooted prejudices". Every girl is taught by her mother that it is virtuous and laudable for a wife to mingle her ashes with those of her husband and that no woman of honour will refuse compliance with the established customs. These opinions, "man have calculated as the easy mode of keeping wives in subjection of securing their attention in the times of sickness and deterring them from administering poison to their husband".

Ovington writes "the rationale of sati as means to deter wives from poisoning husband." Widow burning as by ritual or by forced was the part of Indian culture. This was not the matter of "white men, saving brown women from brown men" as projected by colonial writings. Gayatri Spivak deals with problem very successfully in her work "Can Subalterns Speak?" She clarifies the meanings and real sense behind the performance of sati. She argues that white men saving brown women launched in nineteenth century under the shadow of colonialism. Sunder Rajan discussed in 'Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Post Colonialism' ignores this fact that a bulk of seventeenth century English and other European travellers do not attempt to play a role of Saviors of satis." She argues that the concept of chivalry from "medieval of renaissance Europe" was transferred to colonial India. This transformation made the British men to demonstrate acts of "valour and authority" and intervene in the custom of sati.

Aurangzeb issued an order in 1669 A.D. "that all lands under Mughal control never again should the officials allow a woman to be burnt." Tavernier mentions that Mughal rulers have done their best to suppress sati:
"The Mahomedans, by whom this country is governed, are doing all in their power to suppress the barbarous custom. They do not, indeed, forbid it by positive law, because it is part of their policy to leave the idolatrous population which is more numerous than their own, in the free exercise of its own religion; but the practice is checked by indirect means. No women can sacrifice herself without permission from the governor of the province in which she resides and he grants it until he shall have ascertained that she is not to be turned aside from her purpose to accomplish this desirable end; the governor reasons with the widow and makes her enticing promise; after which, if these methods fail, he sometimes sends her among her women.". Notwithstanding these obstacles, the number of self-immolations is still considerable in the territories of Rajahs, where no Mahomedan governors are appointed.

Sometimes women were bribed by the governor. Pelsaert describes, "A governor once tried to dissuade a handsome widow of 18 committing sati by offering her 500 rupees a year as long as she survived but she did not accept it by saying even if she could have all the king’s treasures in this world they would be of no use to her for she meant to live with her husband".

When the governor finally gave her consent to perform sati Pelsaert continues, "She reached the place a little outside the city. There she took off all her jewels and distributed them among her friends and also her clothes which she disposed of in the same way. Then, she took a hand-full of rice and distributed it to the bystanders; this being done she embraced her friends and said her last farewells, took her baby which was only a year old, kissed it and handed over to her nearest friends. Then she ran to the hut where her dead husband lay and kissed and embraced him eagerly. Then, she took the fire and applied the brand and the friends piled wood before the door; everyone shouted out Ram / Ram (the name of god); the shouts continuing till they supposed she was
dead. When the burning was over, every one took a little of ash of
the bones which they regarded sacred and preserved."

Tavernier describes, “In Patna a young and very beautiful
woman, scarcely more than 22 years of age, once demonstrated to
the governor to resolve to commit sati by holding her hand firmly
in the flame without the least grimace --- till it was scorched." Manucci
with his Armenian friend once rescued a widow from
being burnt and his friend baptized and married her.

According to Bernier, the incidence of Sati was steadily
decreasing in Mughal India. Ovington writes, “When the
Mohammedans became ‘Masters’ of the Indies, their execrable
custom is much abated, and almost laid aside, by the orders which
the governors receive for suppressing and extinguishing it in all
major provinces”.

For the Indian woman becomes the focus of the male
European desires and fears, she was a fantasy in an imaginary land.
As Kate Teltcher describes that the ritual of sati was the part of
Indian Culture as in the decade of 1620s witchcrafts in European
society. The persecution of women as witches continued
throughout seventeenth century. So, identifying sati as an element
of culture clarifies those notions which have been discussed for the
legitimacy of this custom.

Purdah was mainly confined to the rich and well-to-do classes
both the communities in Mughal period. Hamilton writes, “The
Mohammedan women always go veiled when they appear
outdoors.”. John Fryer comments, “It is common among Moores,
their women veil themselves when they go out.”. Terry remarks
‘gentile allowed their women to go out whenever they pleased.’

Della Valle remarks, “For these unless they be dishonest or
poor never come abroad.”. According to Careri, “The
Mohammadan women do not appear in public except only the vulgar sort, and the leud ones”. 50

In Mughal period, no Muslim could tolerate that his wife go outside without veil. Once, a soldier of Indian army travelling with his wife and daughter, the tax collector on the way tried to search the cart by force, where the ladies were sitting. The soldier became so furious that he cut off the head of the tax collector and wounded several of his attendants. He also felt himself dishonored as his wife and daughter had been seen by the tax collector. He killed his ladies too. 51

It was considered dishonour if a Muslim lady of high family discarded purdah to save even her own life. Manucci clarifies, “among the Mohammadans it was a great dishonor for a family when a wife is compelled to uncover herself” 52.

Tavernier writes that males were replaced by females to carry them inside their residence. “The princesses are carried in palankeens covered with embroidered tapestries and every palankee followed by a small carriage which can only contain one person. The objective in taking these carriages are, that when the princesses arrive at houses they are going to visit, the men who carry the palankee are only allowed to go to the first gate, where the eunuchs compel them to retire. The princesses then change into carriage and are drawn by the ladies of honour to the women’s apartments. When a princess desired to ride on an elephant, the animal was made to enter a tent near the palace gate and the mahout (elephant driver) covers his head with a coarse cloth so that he might not see them. 53 To unveil the Muslim women’s litter was subject to court execution.

Purdah was so strictly observed that even the male doctors were not allowed to see and touch a woman patient. Manucci writes, “Mohammedan’s are very touchy in the matter of allowing their women to be seen and even touched by the hand. A strange
method was adopted by the doctors for diagnosing the disease as best as he could without seeing her face or feeling her pulse. A handkerchief was rubbed all over the body of the lady patient and then it was put into the jar of water. The doctor afterward judged the illness by its smell and prescribed the medicine accordingly. The harem had its own infirmary. “When the ladies chance to fall ill, they are carried away to a very pretty set of rooms in palace, which they style the Bimar Khanah, or house of sick,” Manucci notes. On such occasions great care was taken to ensure that the privacy of the harem was not violated.

Bernier was once called to treat a great lady so extremely ill that she could not move to outward gate, a Kashmiri Shawl was thrown over his head, covering him from head to toe, and a eunuch led him in by the hand “as if I had been a blind man.” The shawl was not even removed before the patient, who whether young or old, still remained out of sight, and he was taken back in the same way.

Sometime at the doors, the physicians were led to a specific room where they were allowed to uncover themselves. They only felt the pulse of a person behind the curtain as Manucci claims, “When the physician stretches out his hand inside the curtain, they hold it, kiss it and softly bite it. Some out of curiosity apply it to their breast, which has happened to me several times, but I pretended not to notice, in order to conceal what was passing from the matrons and eunuchs then present and not to arouse their suspicion.”

Male physicians were not allowed to examine women of royal blood without the permission of the King. Says Manucci who claims that he used to bleed Aurangzeb’s wife Nawab Bai from the curtain but wrapped up, leaving only one little spot uncovered, round about as wide as two fingers. Close to the veins— it is just the same when they want themselves to bleed on foot, or any wound Fistula dressed, nothing was ever shown but the part
affected or the vein they wish opened. When I have bleeded the wives and daughter of Shah Alam, each of them gave me two hundred rupees and Sarape.67

The vast majority of Indian women did not wear any shrouds or especially made veil. They did not live in seclusion because their activities did not allow them to observe Purdah. They simply drew the laps of the sari over their face whenever they met a stranger. Their arms and their bodies were otherwise quite exposed. The Hindu ladies could move out of doors with little or no restriction58.

Bernier's account of large number of the Hindu women, married and girls of six or seven, were covered with a single cloth, taking a dip in the river on the occasion of the eclipse of 1666 A.D. is a definite proof of the absence of Purdah among the Hindu women in general.59

Della valle also tells us about the absence of purdah among the Hindu women. The Hindu women were freely seen by everyone, both at home and abroad60.

Nevertheless they are modest and honoured much more than the Mohammedans. Terry also writes “the jealousy of lustful Mohammedans is such that they will not allow the brothers or fathers of their wives to speak to them but in their presence.61

James Tod confirms, “Women of lower class, such as peasant and working women, were entirely free from the bondage of purdah. These women used to help their husbands in all external pursuits and internal economy.”62 Travel writers are divided over the purdah for Muslim women; this confinement indicates the chastity or it is merely an attempt to prevent promiscuity. The freedom of the Hindu women conveys contradictory image. This freedom reflects their husband’s confidence or their sexual availability. Either way the travellers assume that all women of the
same religion behave in the same way, and often contrast the sexual conduct of the Hindu women with that of the Muslims.

Conclusion

Travel writings depict the Indian women, either Muslim or Hindus, as a creature subject to masculine control. These travellers tried to fix this inverted mirror on Indian society which commenced in Europe in fifteen century. The contradictory image of feminine voice which reached a dimax in England and France during the period of 1550-1640 through literature, reflects the mind set of those travellers who visited India in seventeen century. These writings help in framing historical image of women, a body to be veiled or consumed in flames. An ambivalent compound of chastity, sexual appetite and self-immolation, these were the women who were spinning the wheel of time without external disturbances.

Notes and References

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