Women in Crisis: The Colonial Roots of Epidemic Violence and Oppression

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The issue of women's rights and equality is a particularly contemporary phenomenon, having its roots in the first wave of feminism, which started in the mid-19th century and early 20th century in Western Europe and North America. Feminism was a response to the prevailing patriarchal structure of western society, where the public spheres of power and politics were controlled by men, and a woman's role was restricted to the private sphere of home and family. The second wave of feminism, which also occurred in Western Europe and North America, began in the late 1960s and began to politicize feminism by inserting feminist thinking into the personal and public spheres. As Vicky Randall writes in *Theory and Methods in PoliticalScience,* "feminism is innately political, to the extent that it picks out and problematizes the fundamentally political relationship between gender and power." Specifically, feminists criticize ideologies that restrict a women's role within both public and private spheres: according to feminists, the public and private spheres are interdependent, and thus, the conservative view that a woman's role is to uphold the private sphere, without concern for or intrusion into the public sphere, is not satisfactory. Furthermore, for feminists who maintain a rationalist/positivist epistemology (and my own personal view on the matter), the patriarchal system that subordinates women is a social construct, rather than a natural state, and unlike natural states, social constructs can be modified or eradicated. The deliberate or inadvertent exclusion of women from the public sphere and political realm has led to the continuation of female exclusion, and has perpetuated stereotypes surrounding perceived female subordination. For feminists, patriarchy can be seen as a male creation, which must be continued by men to perpetuate the system.

As noted above, the first and second wave of feminism occurred primarily in Western Europe and North America, so these regions have accumulated more progress. Common within developing nations, in contrast, is the minimal progression for the social status, rights, and equality of women. For the purposes of this essay, we can define developing nations as part of what was the European colonial world during the 19th and 20th century, and I will concentrate on the former British colony of India. Women's rights and equality within India are among the poorest in the world: the United Nations has labeled India the most violent place for women in the world.[1] I argue that the origins of the current treatment of women in India are a repercussion of British colonial rule. To support my claim, I will show that there were three major factors contributing to the establishment of India's current patriarchal system. Firstly, Edward Said's concept of Orientalism is vital to understanding the attitude toward and treatment of Indians by their British overseers, which ultimately contributed to the current attitudes towards women. The second fundamental origin of India's current epidemic of female violence is the dowry system, which has its origins in the caste system and British arranged marriages. Lastly, and most unexpectedly, the work of British feminists under the colonial system supported a patriarchal attitude

towards women in India, furthering their oppression. These three factors are crucially important examples of e many social, political, and economic factors that account for the current state of women's rights within India.

It is pertinent to the discourse surrounding current women's affairs within India to understand the history of India as a European colony exploited by the British. The Indian subcontinent was a vital link in the Indian Ocean trade network prior to the 16th century, commonly trading the rich supply of spices that the subcontinent contained. The British East India Company (EIC), established in 1600, monopolized the spice trades of South East Asia and attempted to take full control over Indian spices.[2] During the 16th and 17[th]centuries, European states were emerging from the era of feudalism into capitalism, and used these trade systems as a method to support a free market enterprise in Europe by capitalizing on the reduced price of spices from the East Indies and selling them for an inflated profit. In August 1683, the British Crown gave the EIC full rights to "declare war and make peace with any heathen state of Asia, Africa or America. Further power was given to raise military forces to declare martial law and to defend forts and other installations against foreign invasion or domestic rebellion."[3] This law enabled the EIC to operate as a separate military entity, relieving a need for a formal British colonial establishment within the subcontinent.

The rule of the EIC within India was horribly brutal, commonly making use of male and female slave labour to obtain the required amount of spices, crops, or other products needed. The use of forced labour enabled the EIC to subjugate and control the local population, while providing free labour which increased the company's profits. The EIC maintained territory within India by contracting private armies to maintain control over occupied regions. These private armies had the ability to exercise military power and acted in an administrative role for the EIC.[4] Despite the long existence of the EIC, it was only after the battle of Plessey in 1757, that the EIC took formal territorial control of territories in India. During the Battle of Plessey, the province of Bengal was annexed by the EIC, establishing the first formal territorial claim for the British within the subcontinent.[5] The EIC would maintain control over India until the 1857 Indian Rebellion, where Indian mutineers attempted to seize command of British fortifications from British military regiments and officials. After the rebellion was quelled in June 1858, Queen Victoria abolished company rule in India and established governance under the Viceroy.[6] The British Crown now controlled India as a fully established colony known as British Raj. During both company and colonial rule, the people of India were regarded as an inferior race relative to their European occupiers, and can be considered pawns within a capitalist European empire that emasculated men and demeaned women. The exploitation and abuse of the Indian people by the EIC had enabled British colonial rule to continue exploiting the land, people, and wealth of India. This act of demeaning and subordinating Indians under company and colonial rule ultimately came to be known as "Orientalism."

Since Edward Said's ground-breaking book *Orientalism* was published in 1978, the term Orientalism has come to represent the rhetoric of racial repression and exoticizing of the East.[7] Under Orientalism, the men of the East are portrayed as irrational, infantile, backwards, mysterious, exotic, and also

feminine.[8]The lens which Orientalism has established is intertwined with the politics, economics, and state power of colonial Britain.[9] The political aspects of Orientalism became increasingly evident as a method of self-identification among the British, establishing an "us vs. them" credence that strengthened the sense of identity in the age of European Nation states. The collectivization of all Asian countries into one broad term conveys a system of governance within the colonies that was systematically discriminative and demeaning towards the indigenous people.[10] Under the European Orientalist view, the men of India (and all Asian colonies) were feminine and therefore irrational, infantile, and incapable of self-governance. At the time, gender roles and norms of Britain were strictly defined and extremely misogynistic. It was common for women to receive no education or career training, with the expectation that women would bear children and take care of the home. Women were commonly forced into arranged marriages, in which potential husbands received payment from the woman's fathers in order to marry them. The attitudes towards women implied that they were a male's property and that a woman's worth was defined by her ability to follow strict expectations for her gender. In addition to being forced into the confines of the home, women were regarded as far inferior to men. These misogynistic attitudes towards women within colonial era Britain were transferred to the men of India.[11] As argued by Melani McAlister in her book *Epic Encounters,* the feminization of Eastern men excluded them from practicing democratic rights, as they were not believed to be responsible enough to hold a democratic state, requiring a paternal colonial presence to properly govern the country.[12]

The act of feminizing or emasculating men not only left a significant anti-colonial sentiment among the Indian people, but created a society of strict gender norms within India that would lead to, and continues to create, female oppression. As a method of reclaiming masculinity for men, the public and private spheres within India became excessively separated. In the colonial era, the treatment of women within this public and private life became increasingly more oppressive, with men asserting their own dominance after centuries of being feminized and oppressed by company and colonial rule. The resentment felt by Indian men over their treatment by the British has continued into the current era. A system of patriarchy firmly establishes that the public sphere is something that is ruled by men, and that the private sphere is the domain of women.[13] As part of radical feminists' beliefs, the assimilation of the public and private spheres is essential to politicizing feminism, and the private sphere itself is political.[14] Currently within India, more progression has been made to politicize this private sphere, and to combat abuse against women with the formation of women's rights groups. Ingrained within the men of India is a belief that they must be or should be abusive in order to maintain their position as head of the household, and as head of the household, exploit the private sphere (women) in demand of their own desires and needs.[15] The effect of Orientalist attitudes has led men to overbear the private sphere further than what is typical of western societies, in order to feel the masculinity and power that was previously stripped from them.

Current feminist movements within India, like the "Pink Ladies," aim to reduce if not eliminate the abuse of Indian women by directly confronting abusive men. This particular group acquired its name by the widespread practice of members wearing all pink as a sign of solidarity, pink itself being thought of as a feminine colour and used proudly as such. Leaders within the group aim to confront men directly to

deter them from their actions, commonly threatening them with violence as a method to protect their fellow women. The "Pink Ladies," however, is not just a social organization, but has recently become political by petitioning for legislation and inserting themselves into the political realm as it's "the only way to achieve their goals."[16] The Colonial effect of an emasculated people, or Orientalism, has led to this excessive abuse within the private sphere in order to re-masculinize the men of India. This has facilitated the current situation, which violates and abuses women's rights and equality.

The social construct of marriage has also been a major factor in current women's affairs since the establishment of a dowry system, which itself is a product of the caste system. [17] The caste system, which is similar to the English class system, was in multiple ways a product of British influence in India. This system groups people into different rankings that are both inherited and inescapable.[18] The dowry system of arranged marriage is similar to traditional marriages within Britain during the 19th century, notably being the focus of such literary works as *Pride and Prejudice,* by Jane Austen. As exemplified in Austen's classic, marriage in 19th century Britain was essentially a contract, where an aspiring wife would use a dowry as an incentive to find a husband.[19] This barter for a woman's financial accompaniment in marriage objectifies the woman, treating her like a product that is bought and sold. Because of the large amount of money required to sell the daughter, many baby girls are murdered to eliminate the large financial commitment of raising a girl, which gives little material return to the daughter's parents.[20]Violence towards women, commonly as a result of having an inadequate dowry, is currently at epidemic rates within India. Heinous acts of violence such as bride burning, acid throwing, and mutilation are also perpetrated both by their usbands and their husbands' families, in order to control wives who are seen as being disobedient or uncooperative to their controlling husbands.[21]

Arranged marriages and dowries are currently legal; however, as a result of the dowry system, young girls (and boys) are commonly forced to marry before the age of consent of 18 years of age. Underage marriages are done in secrecy to avoid any laws surrounding the age of consent that might interfere with these traditions.[22] Marrying children at an early age reduces the amount of time required to care for daughters, thus alleviating what is considered a financial burden on the family. Most arranged marriages in India occur within the rural northern regions, largely because of their isolation from police forces and the high poverty rate.[23] arents of children being married will often lie and falsify records of their children's age in order to accelerate the marriage and the acceptance of the dowry. Currently, there are approximately 10 million girls from Northern India married before 18 years of age.[24] After a young woman is married, usually between 13 to 15 years of age, they are commonly forced to have children once they reach puberty. This often results in miscarriages, medical abortion, and death of the young mother.[25] The young wife is denied education or career opportunities by her husband, being forced into the abusive confines of the private sphere by taking the role of "housewife": a social construct that dictates women are meant to bear and take care of children, clean, and cook for the husband. The abuse of women by their husbands has become so problematic that the Center for the Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT) was established to investigate the occurrence of burns, bruises, and beatings of women who required medical attention.[26]

The situation regarding violence towards and rights of Indian women is becoming increasingly political, as opposed to just social. A report from a commission led by J. S. Verma, former chief justice of India, in January 2013, suggested reforms to India's Government are looking at changing medical examinations of abuse and rape victims. These medical examinations are commonly conducted in various ad-hoc manners that are degrading towards the victims.[27] Violence against women was spotlighted recently after the vicious gang rape and death of a 23-year-old woman in Delhi, in December 2012. After the brutal attack, thousands of protesters took to the streets of India's capital, and months later, heated discussion about the disturbing event continues within academic circles, and within the parliament, to come to a possible solution to the epidemic of violence towards women.[28] Increasingly, the system of arranged marriage and dowry have come under the attention of not just the global community, but the policy makers within India to enact reforms to legal and medical guidelines for dealing with victims of abuse.

Instead of empowering women, British feminists, who were working on behalf of the colonial government, were in fact a source of anti-female beliefs. During the latter part of the 19th century, Britain had a slight emergence of feminist politics: not only had the country been ruled by a powerful female monarch, but it had experienced a glimpse of the first wave of feminism. British feminists working with the indigenous Indians depicted the people they were helping as victims in need of saving from their colonial rulers.[29] In order to "help" Indian women, British feminists acted in paternalistic and protectionist ways that sought to impose on Indian women many of the same oppressive gender roles of Victorian femininity that women in the United Kingdom were fighting against.[30] British feminists sought to make Indian women the proper, passive, and idealized Victorian-era women that they themselves rejected.[31] These feminists, who intentionally had Indian women adopt a Victorian femininity, created a contradictory behaviour that encouraged social factors that led Indian women to become subordinate in the same manner women in Britain were. This sense of subordinating Indian women was overlooked because India was essential to feminism within Britain; if they lost the battle on the Indian front, they were likely to lose it at home.

British feminists working within India believed that Indian women should behave in a manner similar to themselves: Indian women must be respectable middle-class English wives, dedicated to their families, running their homes, and guarding their chastity at all costs.[32] This patriarchal view, that was an inherit contradiction to what was being fought for in Britain, would ultimately leave Indian women more degraded than prior to intervention from British women, as Indian women would adopt European customs that entrenched British rule within India. The insertion of British culture in India affirmed a self-perceived European superiority, but encouraged Orientalist rhetoric because it demonstrated to colonial officials how the Indian people needed and benefitted from colonial rule. Because the politics of colonial masculinity had constructed an autonomous, feminized public sphere for indigenous masculinity, a private sphere of the home and family was established for women. Colonial rulers were caught between the demands of native males, to keep out of the Indian home, and the demands of British feminists to save Indian women.[33] The complex relationship between colonial rule and feminism within India can be understood as inherently contradicted by the British feminists, continuing a strong patriarchal system within India.

The political structure of India has been cemented in its roots as a British colonial possession, only becoming autonomous in the 1947 partition. As a result of colonial rule, institutions within India were not developed enough to establish their own unique system of governance. The violent and malevolent treatment of women within India in the contemporary era is a repercussion of the British Raj colonial system. The three reasons most influential for this abusive system are the British attitudes of Orientalism, the dowry system, and the misguided work of British women within India. Through the colonial system, Indian men were treated and portrayed as effeminate, irrational, and incapable of self-governance in a phenomenon known as Orientalism. This universal attitude towards Indian men caused Indian socio-political leaders to establish strict divisions of the private and public spheres, once India had achieved autonomy. This prominent assertion of the public sphere being a male-dominated realm was enforced to regain the sense of masculinity that had been taken away during 300 years of British occupation. Negative attitudes towards women have continued with the use of the dowry system. These arranged marriages have often led to domestic abuse because the private, female sphere is still dominated by men, who often resort to such abuses to assert their self-perceived dominance. And finally, British feminists working with Indian women furthered the extent of a patriarchal system. The three key arguments I have made narrow down many of the continuing socio-political reasons that Indian women continue to face widespread discrimination and violence. The centuries of continued oppression of Indian men and women by British colonial overseers clearly created an atmosphere where the political and social systems of India have been directed in a manner to recreate a masculine identity for men, which in turn took away the rights of women.

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