

The Position of Woman in the Inner Sanctum/ 'Antahpur' of South Asian Monarchy- a Study of Selected South Asian Texts

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Separated from the rest of Asia by the Himalayan range in the north and the north-east, the South Asian subcontinent is surrounded by water bodies on the other three sides. This geographically separates it from the rest of the world. The subcontinent shares a cultural history of religious upheavals, annexation of different kingdoms etc. Consequently, to define South Asia as a single unit one must consider the complex cultural history of the subcontinent which records the cultural ethos and change through time. One also needs to consider the study of the history of the monarchy which necessarily deems that culturally South Asia is one and studying about the women related to monarchies can help in constructing a history of the royal past of the SAARC countries (of the present day). The collective memory of the women of the inner sanctum helps in establishing the composite culture of South Asia.

South Asia has seen few influential women rulers, nevertheless from their inner quarters they have regulated politics to a certain extent. The conditions of the antahpur never really differed, however only the places and names changed. This paper aims to trace the position of royal women in South Asian history as interpreted from various texts and to establish the historiography of those women who have been looked upon as objects of pain and pleasure, but rarely as an individual. This study seeks to identify the compilation of the principal elements which form a common framework that can be applied for studying the space called antahpur. The historical framework adopted for an in-depth analysis of the antahpur ranges from the earliest instances found in literature of the women of the antahpur. This paper mainly focuses on literature and tries to bring out the aim through various literary texts, but at times it has transgressed the boundaries between literature and history.

As the classical period began in the subcontinent with its history of annexations and invasion, the literature especially of the court, became obsessed with the women of the inner chambers. Ancient Sanskrit texts mainly dealt with a happy ending for the lovers and the heroine most of the time were related to the royal family. These texts throw light on the social conditions of the period they were composed. Emperor Harshavardhana (c. 590–647 CE) wrote his Sanskrit play *Ratnavali* (*The Lady of the Jewelled Necklace*), where, "The wife inadvertently masquerades not merely as the mistress but as the mistress masquerading as the wife." (Doniger 29). This is one example of the convoluted relationships among the wives of the antahpur. The jealousy and competence among the queens have been a major part of the condition of the antahpur since earlier times. This is another trope that patriarchy uses to control the women of

monarchies. Sri Harsha's 12th century mahakavya in Sanskrit called *Naiṣadhiya-charitais* another example. Built on the legends of Nala and his wife Damayanti of the *Mahabharata*, this text deals only with the swayamvara of Damayanti and their subsequent marriage. The women of the antahpur had the right to choose their own husbands. Swayamvara was one of the most dominating features of the monarchy which the ordinary women did not have access to.

Careful analysis of some of female characters from the texts encompassing characters from the monarchy reveals their marginal status and the way some of them fought the establishment to rediscover their identity. For instance, it is within the framework of the daily drama against the Rajput, orthodox society, Bhakti poetess Meera Bai was reborn as a Krishna lover. Fighting the socio-cultural conflicts of the time she found her inner call in the form of her spiritual lover Giridhara Gopala. Meera Bai, the 16th century princess of Chittorgarh, engages in very different kinds of discourse with her royal surroundings when, "She removed her title of princess and the comforts of home and declared herself the bride of Krishna against the oppositions of her in-laws. She sang and danced in praise of her lord in total defiance of the world." (Das 12) She composed and sang lyrical verses where she went on to the extent of saying that, "Bhai sanware rang rachi / Sajsingarbaandhpagghunghar, loklaj taj nachi" (Das 10). It literally means, "Charmed by the beauty of Krishna, the dark-blue god, Mira is in an ecstasy. She puts her anklets on and dances in joy forsaking all fear, defying all inhibitions. She touches the height of divine frenzy through dancing " (Das 10-11) Her verses (padas) gives us an insight into the inner workings of her mind and in turn helps us in comprehending one of the most important stages in the history of greater India, but also openly highlights the condition of the inner quarters of that period. Similarly, another queen of Chittor, rani Padmini, is mentioned in Abanindranath Tagore's *Rajkahini* (written around 1905), the chronicle of the kings of Rajasthan. Padmini, who originally hailed from Lanka, created furor with her divine looks and legends informs us that the then ruler of the Khilji dynasty, Ala-ud-din Khilji, attacked Chittor fort for capturing her. It is evident from both texts that at times the women were not safe inside their inner quarters even. The Bangla renaissance writer Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's historical novel *Durgeshnandini* (1865), daughter of the feudal lord, the protagonist Tilottama is captured by the Pathan ruler Katlu Khan during his attack on Mandaran while she is saved from Khan's lust by his own daughter Ayesha. On the contrary, Ayesha falls in love with her father's enemy and Tilottama's lover Jagat Singh, son of Raja Man Singh, who in turns did not accept her as his partner while still praising her beauty in the most poetic way possible. These women present two different aspects of the antahpur, binding them together is the fact that women of the antahpur have always been lusted for or exalted just for the sake of their beauty.

The Mughal Empire has been one of the most influential dynasties to have ruled the subcontinent. The women's contributions to these hugely powerful dynasties have caused major political upheavals. The biography of the second Mughal emperor Humayun has been recorded by his half-sister Shahzadi Gulbadan Begum in *Humayun-Nama*. She had a real hold on Humayun's court and even influenced Humayun's son Akbar. This text minutely paints the picture of the Mughal harem. From the sons showing respect to the Queen mother, the

importance of the main wife, the importance of some of the relatives in the emperor's life and the mention of the women servants who enjoyed a power over the harem. This vivid description of the book allows us to peak a glance into the harem that is not only a place where women are locked away for men's pleasure, but also a place from where women would pull the strings of politics. William Dalrymple's *The Last Mughal, The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi 1857*, shows the intertwined world of the zenana and the mardana. The protected Mughal harem did not remain the same in the age of the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar II. As per Dalrymple Zafar's harem had not much concern for discipline and security and chaos reigned in there. There were too many conflicts going on inside the harem itself.

With the decay in monarchical power the condition of the antahpur declined. Yet, it did not perish completely. From the days of the Raj we can find the women of the inner quarters gradually changing their course in both their quarters and in history as evident from these pieces of literature. As the play of power politics and social changes started happening in the subcontinent before and after the independence of the various contemporary SAARC nations, the societal structure of the monarchy also changed. Its hold lessened as the governmental structure changed. With the introduction of colonial education into the antahpur the patterns of it changed in significant ways. The maharani of Cooch Behar and the daughter of the social reformer of the Brahmo Samaj, Keshub Chandra Sen, Suniti Devi was the example of the new breed of aristocracy who maintained a balance between the incorporation of the foreign culture and the preservation of their royal, traditional past. In her autobiography, *The autobiography of an Indian Princess* (1921), she has mentioned how she was confined within her four walls and was not allowed to meet other men and was abstained from doing certain activities. According to her informal way of description, it seemed that the women like her had internalized patriarchal practices as a part of their life. This is how patriarchy has been controlling women of the inner sanctum since ages. However, in the case of her granddaughter Gayatri Devi things have turned out much differently. Princess of Cooch Behar and Maharani of Jaipur, her autobiography *A Princess Remembers: The Memoirs of the Maharani of Jaipur*, reveals her extraordinary life before and after her marriage. She was restricted to the confinement of the palace but then again was able to follow many outdoor activities and live her life on her own terms. She lived during one of the most transitory periods of Indian history, during the zenith of the British Raj. Even so she was a powerful queen in establishing and maintaining a harmony throughout her palace. She was the third wife of Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II and lived in a polygamous household, but in her memoir, she has accepted and described it as a very natural part of life. Her representation of the country at international level has garnered praises for her by all the generations. On the other hand, the Indian Carnatic singer and activist, Bangalore Nagarathnamma, who was also a devdasi related to the Mysore court, created a sudden disturbance in the powers of corridor of the patriarchy, especially the British government, which was shaken by her publishing of "Radhika Santwanam" (Appeasing Radhika), which was originally written by Muddupalani, Telegu poetess and devadasi related to the court of Tanjore during 18th century. This publication of the erotic narrative created chaos among orthodox elites. Nagarathnamma had to face many troubles for publishing the hundred-year old

manuscripts, but then again, she was a staunch feminist activist, and her voice was heard above the anarchy. Later, after India gained independence, the ban on the book was lifted. Here, we find patriarchy reformulating itself through these two women and Nagarathnamma was oppressed in dual ways- firstly as a woman and then as a colonial subject. This can be understood more by analyzing how women being a colonial subject faced multiple layers of oppression and was dominated by two patriarchies working simultaneously-her own community and of the colonial masters.

When assessed chronologically taking the important periods in the history of the subcontinent when religious upheavals and cultural conflicts shaped the order of the day, the women of the royalty in their every role helps us in understanding the timeless history of South Asia. It represents another history- an alternate, parallel history much neglected and ignored for a long time. Their history is woven around the documented and patriarchal history of South Asia. The inner sanctum's representation all over the subcontinent is similar in most of the countries and even if some royalty had more freedom than others, then, it would confuse the male patriarchal gaze. Hence, even if South Asia is demarcated geographically and politically into different nations, the treatment of the women of the monarchy suggests it is not different at all. Moreover, through this study we can gain an insight into the real world of the inner quarters of royalty and can hope that someday the whole scenario will change; someday the conditions of the suffocating patriarchal veil will be removed and everyone will be treated as one without any discrimination whatsoever so that the division between the 'self' and the 'other' decreases along with the imposition of this binary opposition in society. Furthermore, it is time to realize that both the versions are interlinked, and South Asia is incomplete without each other.

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