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Bodies in Labor Transiting through Colonial Indian History

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Abstract

This paper offers an account of my three year contribution to the Research Project “Bodies in Transit” (ref. FF1201347789C21P) funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness and the European Regional Development Fund. It focuses on the history of the medicalization of childbirth during the British Raj in India, how birth and delivery were stolen from indigenous midwives (dais) and how hospitalization became desirable among the Indian elite. Furthermore, it discusses not only how the traditional birth assistants were represented by the colonial mission of the British Empire in the 19th century but also how American second wave feminism in the 20th century represented traditional midwives as “the Third World Other,” through two wellknown authors: Rudyard Kipling and Katherine Mayo. In order to unravel the mechanisms of this internalized obstetric violence in India, we make use of the theories promulgated by the Spivak, Mohanty, and Foucault, in order to demonstrate that not only motherhood, but also the rite which converts women into mothers, have been manipulated by power.

1. The medicalization of childbirth as a British colonial tool.

The colonial ideology brought the idea that white Western colonizer could save India from its worst nightmares. The medicalization of childbirth was one of the ‘healing’ tools imposed by the West, once the bodies of women in labor were defined as pathological, and labor treated as a disease (therefore pain), to be taken care of at hospitals and with the ‘advances’ of Western medicine.

The British missionary, Elizabeth Bielby, was said to have carried back to Queen Victoria a message from

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the Maharani of Panna in 1883, imploring her to ‘do something’ for her ‘daughters in India’ who suffered so terribly in childbirth. Bielby was an autodidact woman who learned from guidebooks and experience in the Indian zenanas. When British women were granted permission to enrol in schools of Medicine, Bielby came back to her country to be trained in order to continue with her mission in India. Many other women graduated from Medical Schools and since they could not practice in England, they travelled to India even when they did not enjoy the same benefits as their male counterparts. As the British missionaries who were trained in midwifery stayed in India, they displaced indigenous midwives who not only lacked academic training but they also belonged to the lowest castes.

Bielby was the missionary who paved the way for medicalised births to the the Dufferin Fund. It was the Queen herself who suggested Viceroy Lord Dufferin’s wife to become interested in the maternal health of Indian women. The Fund was inaugurated in 1885 and its main objective was to make Western knowledge acceptable and desirable among ‘respected’ Indian women who belonged to upper social classes (Guha, 1998).

Kipling in his poem “The Song of the Women” pitted Western science and technology against inferior native practices and superstitions. Published in The Pioneer Mail in 1888, the speakers are Indian women trapped behind the walls of the zenana, blessing the English medical women and cataloguing the horrors of life before Western medicine reached them. He makes the Western medical women the defenders of universal motherhood who bring medical and social enlightenment to helpless and desperate Indian women. We can find the same topic in his Naulahka (1899), where the nurse heroine, Kate Sheriff, with paternalist goals, desires a position of authority and superiority over inferior people who she assumes need her help more desperately than do selfsufficient independent Americans in Colorado.

The British Empire tried to encourage castes division on its colony and tried to create an elite of Indians who shaped a new class, susceptible to be westernized in order to simplify colonialist efforts. Westernized Indians that belonged to this elite, socially related with colonizers showed an excessive rejection to traditions related to women’s health. They were convinced that childbirth without ‘science’ was not possible, so that they could practice artificial methods newly acquired in their training as midwives in England. Women who belonged to the lowest social classes still needed the assistance of indigenous birth assistants. Therefore, child

delivery lead by Western science became a matter of social class. We must remind that Macaulay in 1835 stated that the new educational system introduced in India had as an objective to create a class of native in blood and color, but English in tastes, opinion moral and intellect. By means of cultural imperialism many natives internalized the admiration towards ‘scientific medicine’ which ruled the Macaulay era.

According to Chawla (2013), the new imported concept of hygiene was the key for the definition of a new class and in contrast to low castes. The amount of reports by missions and colonists about labor conditions was used by the Empire to prove their scientific and moral superiority, based on the promotion of the value of Western medicine as objective and healing medicine. On the other hand, Malhotra (2006) considers this notion of aseptic cleaning and disinfection as a weapon to introduce Western medicine and become an ideology to impose the identity of the middle class in contrast to the purity and pollution notions related to the caste system (Malhorta, 2006). Thus, the concept of ideal motherhood was used by nationalist movement, which included Western ideas (Mukherjee, 2001). The discussion revolved around the idea that an ignorant woman not only endangered her own body, but produced a deficient and weak offspring therefore destroying the nation.

2. Traditional midwives represented by American feminism.

A century later, *Mother India* (1927) by Katherine Mayo is a clear example of how the midwives of the poor (dais or traditional birth assistants) were interpreted and represented by the West. Mary Daly, an influent feminist, considered that Mayo’s fieldwork was realistic because, according to her, it offered firsthand information, and that is why she had always supported it. In her chapter about maternity, Mayo counts dais practices from an orientalist and Eurocentric point of view, emphasizing poor hygiene and the rituals described in a mockery way which shows their uncivilized ignorance. It is interesting to link *Mother India* with Mayo’s previous book, *Justice to All: The Story of the Pennsylvania State Police* (1917, with an introduction by Theodore Roosevelt), which reflects the same preoccupation with race, masculinity and state power (indigenous men as sexually unrestrained inferiors, and celebration of the civilisation wrenched from the jungle by the civilized white men), and most importantly to notice that *Mother India* was published during an intense period of independence agitation in 1927 (condemned by Gandhi and burned in several cities), and that the British government assisted Mayo in her research.

Dais are a clear example of subaltern women because of their gender, class, and caste condition, and apart from any state system that proved their profession, which is outside the established order and is associated with liminality. Their learning period does not take place in schools or hospitals, but in houses next to their mothers and grandmothers before the age of ten. These techniques were catalogued as “not scientific” because they do not have any kind of medical equipment, they do base their job on perceptions like the usage of oil to get to know the progress of a delivery, the placenta state that, after an offering ritual, is buried, and the experience of many other deliveries. They believe in goddesses who govern deliveries instead of oxytocin injections to stimulate contractions. Foucault recognized the problem of dissimilarities existing between the epistemological basis of power and of those who do not belong to the elite:

I believe that by subjugated knowledges one would understand... a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity. (Foucault, 1980).

Following Spivak, we could say that dais can be considered subalterns because of their triple marginalization as women who are outside the Vedic system (they are dalits), and due to the fact that they are represented in the western imaginary as ‘women from the Third World’. As Mohanty argues, the ‘woman from the Third World’ has already been defined as a monolithic entity. In the case of dais, they shoulder a number of stereotypes that make them ignorant, poor, illiterate, in opposition not just to Indian high caste women, but to western women too.

Mohanty suggests that some feminist women writers colonize the material and the historic heterogeneity of Third World women’s life, creating a simple concept of this woman, an image that has arbitrarily been built but which has been created under the authorization of the paternalist Western discourse. This supposes an essentialism based on her gender:

This average Third World Woman leads an essentially truncated life based in her gender (read: sexually constrained) and being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition bound, religious, domesticated, family oriented, victimized, etc.). This is in contrast to the (implicit) selfrepresentation of western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the ‘freedom’ to make their own decisions. (Mohanty, 1985).

3. Conclusions

As a conclusion, traditional birth assistants were not just abandoned by the biomedical colonialist discourse but by the western feminist one, too, as both discourses are imperialists. The main problem has to do with power hierarchies and with their consistent oppression, from where taxonomical categories emerge through opposite and irreconcilable dichotomies: colonizer/colonized, poor/middle class, pure caste/contamination of untouchable women, etc. The linear conception of time makes ‘progress’ to be considered as opposite to ‘traditional,’ this way, it is expected that Indian society follows the West in its evolution to ‘modernity’ as a desirable phenomenon. We know that history is written by elite and it marginalizes those who cannot dominate because they have no power. And this way, dais have been banished from history.

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