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The Cultural Construction of Women in British India and Its Postcolonial Legacy

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Abstract

British colonialism played a pivotal role in shaping the prevailing physical, intellectual, psychological, and historical representations of Indian women in contemporary Indian society. The policies and strategies employed by the British to control Indian society, particularly through the establishment of a Western-style education system, served to position the Indian populace as inherently inferior to their Western counterparts.

In the Indian context, colonial rule—especially under British governance—had a uniquely profound impact, distinct from colonial experiences elsewhere. It not only played a crucial role in determining the trajectory of India's future but also redefined prevailing understandings of its past. Over the course of more than a century, British colonial rule significantly restructured the social, economic, political, and cultural foundations of Indian society.

Moreover, the colonial period witnessed the emergence of new women and articulation of complex interrelations between various categories such as gender, caste, social reform, communalism, and nationalism. The colonial experience in India is particularly noteworthy due to the extensive range of mediums—official records, oral histories, print culture, personal memoirs, myths, material realities, rhetorical representations, art, theatre, and more—through which the identity of colonial India was both constructed and reconstructed. This process was especially evident in the representation of Indian women, most notably upper-caste Hindu women.

These representations sparked new debates concerning the roles and identities of women within colonial and nationalist discourses. Partha Chatterjee famously referred to this phenomenon as the “colonisation of the mind.” According to Chatterjee, colonial rule not only subjugated Indian society politically and economically, but also profoundly shaped its cognitive frameworks and imaginative capacities—particularly with regard to gender and the representation of women.

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