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"THEY ASKED 'US' TO BE NICE ANGELS": WOMEN'S IDENTITY (RE)CONSTRUCTION IN POSTCOLONIAL SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

According to the historical and socio-cultural trajectory of Sri Lanka, women's identities have been shaped by intertwined forces of patriarchy, colonialism, religion, and nationalism. With successive waves of South Indian influence and nearly 450 years of colonial rule under the Portuguese, Dutch, and British empires, the island's political, economic, and cultural structures were profoundly transformed. Within this milieu, the Victorian notion of respectable femininity, intermingling with indigenous cultural traditions and patriarchal norms, continues to play a significant role in constructing women's identity in the postcolonial Sri Lankan context. Drawing on postcolonial feminist critiques, particularly the concept of double colonisation, this literature analysis explores how Sri Lankan women's identity construction reflects the convergence of colonial power and patriarchy. Even as women enter the workforce in modern contexts, expectations of morality and respectability continue to regulate their behaviour, dress, speech, and professional choices. Thus, respectable femininity operates as a normative framework through which postcolonial women negotiate their identities within a hybrid cultural order. Therefore, this study reveals that the construction of women's identity is far more complex in a postcolonial context.

Keywords: *identity, patriarchy, respectable femininity, colonization, double colonization*

INTRODUCTION

The historical positioning of women in Sri Lanka reveals a complex interplay between indigenous patriarchal traditions and colonial modernity. Although Sri Lanka gained sovereignty from the British Empire in 1972, social institutions and gender norms continued to be shaped by British values (Jayawardene, 2000). Cultural texts and familial practices consistently directed girls to be calm, shy (lajja baya in the Sinhalese language), and self-sacrificing, reinforcing a system in which the father or husband occupies a superior position.

Colonial education further intensified this process by introducing Victorian codes of femininity that encouraged restraint and domestic refinement while limiting women's autonomy (Jayawardene, 1986; Jayawardene, 2002). Victorian respectability for women was based on restraint, self-regulation, and self-control, demonstrated through sobriety, cleanliness, marriage-only sexuality, thrift, self-reliance, and religious observance (Whiteside, 2007).

Within this socio-historical framework, women's identity—defined as "the conception of the self, reflexively and discursively understood" (Alvesson, 2010, p. 193)—cannot be separated from what postcolonial theorists term double colonisation, the simultaneous subjection to colonial power and patriarchy. Although modernisation and economic participation have expanded women's public roles, the normative boundaries of respectability continue to shape their conduct. Through a critical review of existing literature, this study explores how the (re)construction of women's identity in the postcolonial Sri Lankan context remains embedded in the Victorian notion of respectable femininity and patriarchal control.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative literature-based research design grounded in postcolonial feminist theory to examine how women's identities in postcolonial Sri Lanka are constructed and negotiated within intersecting structures of patriarchy, colonial legacies, and cultural respectability. Rather than collecting empirical data, the study systematically analyzed historical texts, cultural narratives, and scholarly literature to trace the socio-historical evolution of respectable femininity and its influence on women's identity formation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Normative Way of Respectable Women in Sri Lanka

According to historical accounts, more than 2,500 years ago, the kingdom of Sri Lanka was ruled by Queen Kuveni (Jayawardene, 1986). Although Queen Anula Devi, Soma Devi, and Lilavathi later ruled the kingdom and even led armies into battle (Jayawardene, 1986), their roles were not recognised as equivalent to male kingship in historical narratives.

Due to the island's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka experienced numerous waves of migration from South India and other regions, which influenced its cultural and social identity (Rambukwella, 2018). Subsequently, the island came under Western colonial rule—first the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch and the British—for nearly 450 years (Jayawardene, 2002). As a result of colonisation, the political, social, and economic structures of Sri Lanka were profoundly transformed.

Both colonial ideologies and indigenous cultural traditions—particularly those influenced by Indian practices and religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism—defined the primary role of women in the colonised context as mothers, wives, and daughters within the household (Jayawardene, 1986; Rambukwella, 2018). Historically, girls were expected to be calm, modest, and respectable. One of the well-known poems from Kavya Sekaraya, which contains advice from

a father to his daughter upon marriage, illustrates how a girl's behaviour is regulated and how her identity is constructed within patriarchal norms.

Do not leave the house without your husband's permission.
When you go out, do not walk fast and see that you are properly clad.
Be like a servant to your husband, his parents and his kinsmen.

Do not admit to your companionship the fickle courtesans,
The thief, the servant, the actress, the dancer,
The flower-seller or the washerwoman.

Sweep your house and garden regularly and see that
It is always clean. Make sure that you light the
Lamps to the gods both at dawn and dusk.

When your husband returns home from a journey,
Receive him joyously and wash his feet;
Do not delegate this task to servants.

Do not spend your time standing at your door,
Strolling about in gardens and parks and do not
Be lazy at your household duties.

Protect the gods in your house. Do not give
Anything away even to your children,
Without your husband's consent.

If your husband's attention seems directed elsewhere,
Do not speak to him about it, let your tears be
The only indication of your sorrow.

Seek out your husband's desire for food and see that
He is constantly satisfied, feed him and ensure his
Well-being like a mother.

When you go to your husband, let it be like a goddess,
Beautiful, clad in colourful skills, ornaments and sweet-smelling perfumes.

Be the last to go to bed and the first to rise.
When your husband wakes, see that you are by his side.

Even if your husband appears angry and cold,
Do not speak roughly to him; be kind and forgiving
Never think to look elsewhere for your comfort.

(extracted from Jayawardene, 1986, p.113)

Accordingly, from ancient times to the present, Sri Lankan girls have been socialised to become women who are calm, modest, and obedient, who perform household duties, and who subordinate themselves within the family while maintaining the family's reputation. This reflects how the patriarchal system has historically governed women's behaviour and self-presentation. Parents—especially mothers and elderly women within the family—often advise girls to behave modestly and shyly (lajja baya) from childhood in order to preserve the family's respectability (Jayawardene, 2002). Gunathilake (2018) similarly argues that girls in Sri Lanka are socialised within their families to become 'respectable women'.

> "*My parents applied the concept of a ripened papaw to me. They believe that if a papaw has ripened, it should be plucked and kept inside so that not even an insect can harm it. Similarly, a respectable young woman should be properly protected by her parents*." (Gunathilake, 2018, p. 200)

This extract illustrates how Sri Lankan girls are socialised within the family to internalise norms of protection, modesty, and respectability. Consequently, the notion of respectability becomes deeply embedded in women's lives, particularly within collectivist societies.

The idealised cultural expectation for girls to perform 'niceness'—the normative subject position of a girl—includes being compassionate, nurturing, sexually naive, non-competitive, and socially supportive (Hammarström, Ahlgren, & Wiklund, 2018). Jayawardene (2002) further explains that within the traditional Sinhala family structure, children often show greater respect toward the father than toward the mother. The mother typically eats later than other family members, symbolising her subordinate position. Such practices reinforce the patriarchal hierarchy within the family, where the father or husband is regarded as the authority figure (Gunathilake, 2018; Jayawardene, 1986; Jayawardene, 2002).

Although certain practices have evolved over time, women are still expected to conform to many of these norms of respectable behaviour. For example, girls are often discouraged from spending nights away from home, even with relatives, and strict rules regulate their dress and behaviour after puberty (Jayawardene, 2002). Women, therefore, perform respectability in order to gain social acceptance.

Respectability, Colonial Education, and Cultural Hybridity

Following colonisation, Sri Lankan women gained access to education through Christian missionary schools. Missionaries perceived Sinhala Buddhist women as undisciplined and attempted to reform them by introducing education and Christian moral values (De Alwis, 1997; Hewamanne, 2003; Jayawardene, 1986). These missionary schools not only trained girls to become good wives but also introduced them to nineteenth-century European codes of female virtue and behaviour (Jayawardene, 1986).

Thus, education played a crucial role in transforming the image of the 'traditional woman' into the Victorian ideal of femininity. Sinhala women adopted Victorian styles of dress, discipline, and domestic behaviour in order to present themselves as respectable within colonial society.

However, this process also created a hybrid cultural identity, combining indigenous traditions with colonial values. Although colonial rule officially ended, these cultural influences continue to shape social norms in Sri Lanka.

Nationalist leaders such as Anagarika Dharmapala further reinforced ideals of respectable femininity by promoting the sari as the appropriate attire for Sinhala Buddhist women and advocating an 'Aryan way of life' centred on chastity, domestic duty, and obedience to the husband (Jayawardene, 1986). Consequently, both colonial and indigenous cultural discourses contributed to shaping the normative model of respectable femininity in Sri Lanka.

Respectability and Women's Work

Modernisation gradually enabled women to enter the workforce, yet their professional opportunities were initially limited to socially acceptable occupations such as teaching, nursing, midwifery, and dressmaking (Jayawardene, 1986; Jayawardene, 2000; Jayawardene, 2002). Even today, expectations of respectability and morality continue to restrict women's professional advancement. Women are often expected to balance employment with domestic responsibilities while maintaining modest behaviour in the workplace (Fernando & Cohen, 2014).

For instance, employment in garment factories has historically been stigmatised as morally questionable for women (Hewamanne, 2008). Similarly, working women are often expected to return home before dark and avoid late-night social activities (Fernando & Cohen, 2014). Thus, the notion of respectable femininity extends beyond the domestic sphere into professional contexts as well.

Postcolonial Feminist Perspectives

Postcolonial feminist scholars argue that women in formerly colonised societies experience multiple forms of oppression. Mohanty (1984) critiques the construction of the 'Third World woman' as a passive and homogenous figure defined primarily by victimhood. According to Mohanty, hegemonic discourses portray Third World women as religious, family-oriented, illiterate, and domesticated, ignoring the diverse historical and cultural contexts in which women live.

Similarly, Jensen (2011) observes that women often exist within identities shaped by male-dominated social structures. Patriarchy, defined by Walby (1989) as a system of social structures and practices through which men dominate and exploit women, continues to influence women's lives in postcolonial societies. Petersen and Rutherford (1986) introduced the concept of double colonisation, referring to the simultaneous oppression of women by colonial power and patriarchal structures (McLeod, 2000). In the Sri Lankan context, colonial legacies combined with indigenous patriarchy create complex dynamics that shape women's identity formation.

Identity is a complex and evolving concept studied across multiple disciplines (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001). Scholars argue that identity formation is closely linked to historical and cultural contexts, particularly in postcolonial societies where colonial legacies continue to influence social structures (Pieterse, 2002). In such contexts, cultural hybridity emerges as individuals adopt and

adapt elements from multiple cultural traditions. Postcolonial women, therefore, construct their identities within hybrid cultural frameworks that combine indigenous traditions, colonial values, and contemporary social expectations.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the colonial era has officially ended, the echoes of colonialism continue to shape the postcolonial context of Sri Lanka. The fragmentation and identity struggles experienced by formerly colonised societies remain central themes in postcolonial scholarship. Within this context, the construction of women's identity is deeply influenced by the intersection of colonial legacies and patriarchal traditions embedded within Sri Lankan society. Therefore, the (re)construction of women's identity in postcolonial Sri Lanka remains a complex process shaped by hybrid cultural norms and enduring expectations of respectable femininity.

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