1 Introduction

To create monolithic constructions of women, of any time period or spatial location, is not academically a sound procedure; yet, in every day conversations and in the collective mind, the archetypes of womanhood not only exist but they inform actions and practices, albeit most often erroneously. Therefore, to begin to write a book about Indian women, one begins with a great deal of misgivings and caution. Yet, I felt the need to address this stereotyping to write about something that already exists in the popular imagination as a 'construct' with the explicit purpose of demystifying some of the popular conceptions and also add in a modest way to the knowledge about the women of South Asia, in particular focusing on India. To do so, I felt that the gendered methodology introduced and used by an array of scholars, largely to deconstruct received wisdom of a particularly patriarchal kind (not to say racist and elitist), would be contributive to provide a degree of insight and critical assessment of how women are constructed in the popular mind and media and how to look underneath the projected images to search for what gave rise to them in the first place. The attempt has been made to put together bits and pieces to create a collage of shreds and patches and then, to stitch it all together into a tapestry that looks uneven and multi-shaded, somewhat like the patchwork quilts created by the hands of indigenous women in Southern America. Thus, this work may not have the smooth brilliance of a male creation but has the rough realism created by working feminine hands. But let me first begin with posing the question, why talk about women?

Societies, at least in the modern times, are identified through their women. Feminine faces, most often than not, advertise locations, cultures and people. Although the world remains patriarchal, yet women create boundaries across cultures; they are exoticized, projected and always provide a reference point to bring up discussions about the 'Other'. This is understandable in view of the fact that even today, the voices heard most across the world are male; it is but obvious that these voices should be talking about 'those women' or 'their women'. From the 1970s, academic discourse has relied heavily

on 'gendering' as a methodology, as a way to decentralize the views of and about the world from a male-centric focus. It is also true that most of what is available to us today as knowledge is via the mediation of the West. From the post-colonial times, knowledge has been monopolized and routed through the West in a way that even knowledge about non-Western people has been legitimized and made available by the Western scholars both to the world and to the people who are the subjects of this knowledge.

A gendered methodology has been directed at decentralizing the white and the male protagonist from the centre stage of worldly discourse.[1] The feminist researchers have critically evaluated positivism, empiricism and the methods of science (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Sarkar, 1997: 70) and raised specific questions about the power hierarchies colouring perspectives and findings (Bhavnani, 1994; Haraway, 1991); they have shown that neutrality and equity is not an integral aspect of Western science or scholarship.[2] Women have privileged themselves as speakers from the margins, holding vantage ringside positions in the arena of social drama. Since they are not the central actors, they are the critics. They can look up from the bottom, they can speak not as stakeholders but as victims and they can see what the powerful cannot for they do not wear the dark glasses of the profit makers and the exploiters, the conquerors and the killers. For, no doubt, women have transformed and they have been changing their roles, yet, in no epoch of the world have they made history, like a Chenghez Khan, or a Hitler, or even a Napoleon or a George Bush. The most powerful person in the world, the President of the United States, is yet to be a woman, although women have held power in many other countries of the world. The world is still constructed through the eyes of white men or at least, men who dominate the West. Women have been recognized as the silent half of humanity (Beauvoir, 1949). This is the reason why when we talk of a gendered approach, it means the focus is on women; because it is women who need to be heard and felt and known. Gender refers to both men and women but since a non-qualified approach to the world is so obviously male, the qualified approach has to be female. Thus, when I say nothing, it means man, but when I say gender, it means woman.

[1] Of course, this is within the post-modernist discourses of Foucault, Gadamer, Derrida and Nietzsche (Hekman, 1990: 13–26).

[2] 'In recent decades philosophers of science have launched a frontal attack on the enlightenment concept of "science" – Following the path breaking work of Thomas Kuhn, the philosophers of science have reexamined the rationalist basis of science and found it to be wanting' (Hekman, 1990: 110).

Thus, language does reflect social reality. 'Thus, hierarchies in other realms of life were often expressed in terms of gender, with dominant individuals or groups described in masculine terms and dependent ones in feminine' (Wiesner-Hanks, 2008: 3).

But again, all this is within a Western point of view that has monopolized the gender discourse so that even when the non-Western scholars speak, they have to situate themselves within this frame of reference. So, essentially the hierarchy that we are talking about here, the constructions of male and female, are all drawn from a Western root or philosophy, a point by now raised and debated to an extent that the earlier generalizations such as 'universal subordination of women' (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974: 7) or the public–private and nature–culture dichotomy have all been culturally contextualized and multiple point of differences have been presented. Although the dominant voices refuse to die down, alternative voices are making an impact and continuing to do so, especially in the new century. What we are now striving for is not to construct differences keeping a Western scale as standard but to completely deconstruct the world and recast it. The feminist methodology with its emphasis on 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, 1988: 581) has found support in ecological movements and environmentalism, another platform on which the Western, white and male-centric forms of knowledge have been challenged (Grim, 2001). Thus, women finding a means to express themselves by putting forward their own voice has led to an interrogation of the validity of current knowledge. Feminism, although it challenges modernism, has itself modernist roots emerging from either liberal humanism or Marxism. Thus, a non-Western feminist thinking needs to find an alternative base to situate itself, to look for its roots in its own regional history and philosophy. Speaking of non-Western philosophies, Daya Krishna says,

> Philosophy is, however, nothing but the conceptual structure itself and hence any attempt at comparative philosophizing is bound to lead to an awareness of an alternative conceptual structure, a different way of looking at the world, a different way of mapping the cognitive terrain than that to which one is accustomed. (Krishna, 1989: 72)

Thus, if we approach gender from a non-Western philosophical point of view, then one has to look for different premises of world construction, a different cognitive approach, and these are best examined through those inscriptions that most forcefully shape the cognitive world, namely, religion, mythology and cosmology. Since working from the margins

from a gendered point of view is to engage in critical introspection, therefore, parts of this book may appear autobiographical, but that is only in the sense that gender constructions or even understanding of them cannot be situated away from self. A criticism of an objective centre, as already discussed, is replaced by the subjective self-driven view of the world, that is nevertheless contextualized and formalized through comparisons and drawing upon received wisdom.

How Gender is Understood in South Asia?

To understand gender from a non-Western point of view is indeed to tread on unfamiliar cognitive terrain. Gender is not a stand-alone concept, as indeed no concept is. First of all, we have to decide which worldview we are locating ourselves in. South Asia is a vast and differentiated continent with at least five major religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Islam. The first four are born on Indian soil and often taken to subscribe to some essential worldviews that are more of the subcontinent than of any particular group or cult. Islam, coming from the Middle East, has separate roots, yet on the subcontinent, has modified itself considerably. But in this book, we concentrate largely on the Hindu philosophy or conceptual structure that has informed the other four religions, and although Islam has been an integral part of the history and social life of the continent and left deep imprints on culture, we shall, for the sake of clarity, leave out Islam from our discourse. This is only a methodological simplification for we are, as we shall discuss presently, attempting to construct a model. It would probably be a monumental exercise (possibly unattainable) to go into the actual empirical situations and we shall not leave out Islam or Muslims from our data and description but just construct our model out of the philosophical and social roots of Hindu values and social norms. Another reason for leaving out Islam is that it is closer to the Judeo-Christian traditions of the West. The model that we are building up is away from this tradition and certainly based upon quite contrary premises.

The first major difference between the Western or Judeo-Christian and the Hindu/South Asian worldview is that the former is both essentialist and dichotomous. The West believes irrevocably that there are two sexes and one cannot naturally and normally change into another. Anything that is not either here or there is anomalous. Thus, trans-sexed, transvestites, homosexuals, etc., are all considered by conservative whites to be anomalous. There is, in other words, no legitimate place for them in society.

However, the Indian thought is not essentially dichotomous. Transitions and continuities are both normal and privileged. Transgendered persons have a place in society and have ritual as well as cultural value. Myths and folklore abound with stories of sex change, of highly placed transgendered persons and most importantly, the ritual value of the hermaphrodite, half-man, half-woman, symbolized by *Ardhanarishwara*, a form of Shiva worshipped all over India. The Hindu worldview recognizes the male and female principles of the universe as *Purusa* and *Shakti*, where *Shakti* is the active principle, the regenerative force of the universe (Upadhyaya, 1941 reprint: 21),[3] and *Purusa* is passive and functions to control the power of *Shakti* that if left uncontrolled, can become destructive.

Creation is not finite and neither is the universe. Time is cyclical and in Hindu philosophy, the destructive and the creative forces are synonymous. Thus, Shiva, the creator, is also the destroyer; and the loving and nurturing mother, in the form of Parvati, can also become blood thirsty and destructive in the form of Kali. One form can change into another and there is no essential difference between creation and destruction or between *Purusa* and *Shakti*, for both are unified in the form of the oneness that is the ultimate deity, sometimes depicted in embodied form as Shiva–*Shakti* or *Ardhanarishwara* or sometimes, only as the symbol of 'Om'.

Thus, gender is not an essential dichotomy, embodied once and for all. The categories are not opposed but complementary if existing separately, but such separation is not natural or inevitable and the two may merge and become one; and ultimately, one may realize, as one often does, that they were not separate in the first place. The philosophy of existence of the *atmān* is at root of this vision of a unified universe: the *atmān* has no character,

[3] This passage from Upadhyaya (1941 reprint: 21) clearly illustrates the concept of *Shakti* in the *Rig Veda*: 'One of the most dramatic and powerful hymns of the Ṛgveda is uttered by Vāc, the daughter of Ambhṛṇa. She is herself the Ṛṣi of the hymns and is conceived as the goddess presiding over speech. In her utterances she emphatically expresses the idea of the unity of the universe. She is the force that bends the bow for Rudra that his arrow may strike and slay the hater of devotion. She rouses and orders battle for the people and pervades heaven and earth. She is who brings forth the father, i.e. the sun, on the summit of the world; her dwelling is in ocean from where she extends over all existing creatures and touches even the far off heaven with her forehead. She breathes a strong breath which generates a tempest, while she holds together all existence. Mighty in her grandeur she appears "from beyond the heaven and from beyond the earth". She is the *Sabdabrahma* of the later times pervading the entire universe and accompanying all gods. She is the primeval energy of the universe, the feminine counterpart of the creating and annihilating God. Her hymn is made the basis of Śāktaism.'

neither male nor female, no varna no *jāti*, nor anything else, it takes on bodies like we change clothes and leaves them to pass on to another existence. This belief in reincarnation is present in all South Asian philosophical doctrines. It also leads to locating differences in a particular situation only, without giving them an immutable nature. Nothing is fixed, everything moves on and changes form; yet, the change is only superficial for, ultimately, all become one with the *paramatmān* (the ultimate reality). The *atmān* is thus both emanating from and merging with the *paramatmān*, 'divine being pervades the whole world, and is found eternally within the individual. Divine being is thus the supreme "Self"' (Smart, 1996: 89). While Hinduism has the concept of Self, Buddhism denies it and reincarnation is seen as the passing on of an animating force. This reality is again unqualified, it has no describable characters. Thus, unlike Christianity that believes God created Adam in his own image, thereby legitimizing once and for the existence of God as male (Father), Vedic Hinduism has no such qualifications for the Ultimate Being. 'The Absolute and the state of liberation were perceived to exist beyond the cosmos, beyond the gods who, in symbolizing and manipulating natural forces in a supernatural way, are implicated in the visible world' (ibid.: 58). The consciousness or Self having no gendered character has implications in the way the real world is imagined. At every point, there is always the possibility of a transition, although popular Brahmanical folklore may say that if a person does good deeds in a past life, he is born as a male and a Brahmin, such is not supported by any text. In fact, there is no essential denigration of the feminine in any South Asian philosophy or even social beliefs.

Gender and Personhood in Myth and Antiquity

'Hindu gender ideology admits gender overlap, gender transformations and alternative genders in myth, ritual and human experience' (Nanda, 1999: 145). *Shiva/Purusa* and *Shakti/Prakriti* are the male and female principles; they are not necessarily embodied as men and women. These are principles by which the universe operates. They may manifest themselves in actual men and women, at various times and in different ways. Let us take the story of Brihannalā, the eunuch, the form which the most famous warrior, Arjuna, had to take for some time. This is one of the stories in the Mahabharata, an epic poem that depicts the social life and culture of ancient India with a range and scope almost unmatched by any other epic. The story is of five brothers, born of a human mother but having gods as fathers, as their

sociological father, Pandu, the King, is impotent. Queen Kunti has a boon that she can call upon one god at a time and is urged by her own husband to do so, in order to ensure that the kingly lineage is continued. Thus, she bears four sons. The eldest having been born before she was married is discarded, but the other three are as follows: born of the god of death/dharma, Yamā, is Yudhistira; of Indra, the god of the heavens, is Arjuna; and of the god of wind, Vayu, is Bhima. Arjuna is the bravest and the best warrior in the universe. Yet, under a curse, he is to spend twelve years *incognito*; he has to spend one year as a eunuch teaching dance and music to a princess who later becomes his daughter-in-law. There is no contradiction in the bravest and skilful warrior teaching dance to a girl, living in the women's quarters and wearing women's clothes. He is still the best dance teacher, remains strong and brave and is able to defend his wife's honour (who is also living incognito as a maid servant).

Complimentary to the story of Brihannalā is that of Chitrangada (immortalized by the Nobel laureate poet, Rabindranath Tagore, in his poetry). She is born a princess of the remote region of Manipur and is brought up like a man by her father who has no son. She learns all the craft of warfare, is brave and strong like a man and is a true defender of her people, like a ruler is supposed to be. She lacks the charm and seductive qualities of a woman and is unmarried. She falls in love with Arjuna who happens to come to this remote area on one of his incognito wanderings. She uses magic to transform herself into a beautiful woman who is able to seduce Arjuna by her feminine charms. Yet, while residing in the kingdom, Arjuna is soon informed about the brave princess, Chitrangada, who is worshipped by her citizens as a mother and as a protector of her people. Hearing of her chivalry and bravery, Arjuna asks his beloved (Chitrangada in disguise) about her. The beautiful version of Chitrangada tells Arjuna that the woman he is admiring is ugly, she has not the charm or the wiles of a woman, she is straightforward as a man, has no aptitude to adorn her, goes about with her weapons and is strong and fearless, that is, not feminine. Arjuna, however, exclaims that he is fascinated by this brave woman, that he has no need for womanly charm but is full of admiration for her bravery and her qualities that, he declares, make her the most beautiful woman on earth. Hearing this, Chitrangada reveals her true self and Arjuna reaffirms his love for her, marries her and they have a son.

What is of interest here is that even in antiquity, for the Mahabharata was written at least a couple of thousand years back, Indian aesthetics was putting

character above beauty and women were considered attractive because of their mental and physical qualities. In other words, women were not considered as driven by instinct or as mere toys for sexual pleasure. We have many other such instances where women were attractive to men not because of beauty but because of strength, valour and intelligence. We have the story of Savitri, the only pampered daughter of a mighty king, who sets out on a tour of the world on horseback to find herself a husband; of Subhadra, who drives the chariot on which she elopes with her lover (Krishna); and in more recent times, there is the famous legend of the King of Mandu who falls in love with a tribal woman who he sees restraining a wild buffalo with her bare hands. Fatima Mernissi (2001) has made a similar analysis of how the Arab women have been seen as exotic sex toys, symbolized by the harem; yet, the harem was no more than a place of residence for women and children, and more importantly, a woman could fascinate a man and hold him captive, not by her physical attributes but her mental capacities, her talent and her courage. The famous Scheherazade of the *One Thousand and One Nights* was not a seductress but a woman of great learning and skill, who held the emperor spellbound by her intellect, her storytelling skills and the vast knowledge that she was able to mobilize into storytelling. Mernissi accuses the Western male-centric gaze to have exoticized the harem into the white man's sexual fantasy, whereas the real woman in the Arab world was more brains than beauty.

Thus, in South Asia, and even as we shall presently see in the near East, masculine and feminine qualities are not separated or dichotomized. It is for this reason that there is no apparent contradiction of a brave warrior donning women's clothes for he remains strong and a skilled warrior even as a eunuch dancer. The South Asian imagination has no place for the 'macho' man or the delicate woman. In fact, in South Asian culture, there is no recognition that women are weaker, either physically or mentally, and men are not required to get up and offer seats to women or be overly protective about them physically as in the West. All over India, one sees women working at construction sites and carrying heavy loads or breaking stones by the roadside. It is not essentially femininity that requires physical pampering but some other considerations. At the same time, a woman is seen as perfectly capable of being intellectual, wise and rational; thus, neither strength nor intellect is seen as male prerogative and, on the other hand, sentiments, emotions and softness are not exclusively female.

The Relationship between Fear and Domination

Mernissi (2001: 94–95) brings out the essential difference between how Western men have viewed women and how they are looked upon in the Orient. In a highly perceptive sentence, she says, referring to Immanuel Kant's vision of silent women as attractive, 'In Kant's enlightened West, the world is not populated by a single race of humans who share the capacity to feel and think, but by two distinct kinds of creatures; those who feel (women) and those who think (men)' (p. 94). Howsoever, Mernissi sets the mind thinking when she says, 'Could it be that the violence against women in the Muslim world is due to the fact that they are acknowledged to have a brain, while in the West, they are often considered to be incapable of deep or analytic thought?' (ibid.: 95).

In commonly understood Hinduism (Hinduism is a compound of many schools of thought and too complex to be discussed here), the female principle or *Shakti* is active, creative, powerful and if not curtailed, can turn destructive. *Purusa* is pure consciousness and passive and inert, yet, *Prakriti* needs to be controlled by *Purusa* so that she does not go out of control. The symbolic representation of this relationship is best seen in the iconography of Kali, the most destructive manifestation of the feminine principle. As Kali, the mother goddess (*Shakti*) runs amok, killing anyone that comes in her way, drinking their blood, her tongue lolls out, dripping blood, she has a garland of human heads around her waist and is dark and naked; the only way her demonic fury could be controlled was by her husband, Shiva, who lays down on the ground in front of her. As soon as Kali's feet touch Shiva, she stops in horror, for a woman is not supposed to stand over her husband. Her fury vanishes and she calms down.

Translated into social perceptions, it is believed that a woman's unbridled power can be dangerous unless controlled by a man. Thus, it is said in India that an unmarried woman needs to be controlled by her father/brother and a married woman by her husband; but as a widow, not being under any kind of direct male authority she is potentially powerful and hence dangerous. This is why upper-caste widows who could not remarry were subjected to all kinds of physical subjugation, so that they became weak and lost their power. Widows were tonsured, made to eat very frugal meals, fast often and generally lead an ascetic life. Yet, royal widows and their modern equivalents have often held immense power. As we shall be discussing in detail, gender in India is not about sexual differences but it is interwoven with considerations of class, caste and situational conditions. Thus Rao (2003: 3) problematizes

the representation of women, 'as somehow unmarked or disembodied from their caste or religious identity'; raising doubt if it is at all realistic to do so.

The need for curbing their power is illustrated by the myths of goddesses whose power is unlimited. The 2000-year-old temple of Goddess Meenakshi in Madurai, South India, has a myth corroborating this process of *Purusa* controlling *Prakriti*. Long ago, the region was a dense forest where Indra practised meditation invoking Shiva. With Shiva's presence marked there, a king built his capital in that area and named it Madhurapura (sweet as nectar). Many years later, a descendant of this king had a beautiful daughter named Meenakshi, who was an only child. After her father's death, Meenakshi sat on the throne, and many suitors sought her hand, but she rejected one and all. The discarded suitors, who were themselves princes, wanted revenge for their insult and joined together to overthrow her from her throne and usurp the kingdom. But Meenakshi confronted them, whirling her sword and killed them before they could even resist her. With blood dripping from her sword, the princess rode furiously on her horse thirsting for more blood but after a distance, she came across a benign and smiling male figure. As soon as she faced him, the sword dropped from her hand; she realized that she was confronting Shiva and then her own identity was also revealed to her and she realized she was Shiva's consort, Parvati. The two united on earth and in Meenakshi's temple, there is a shrine of Shiva where he is known as *Sunderaswara* (beautiful god).

In this myth, the intrinsic nature of *Prakriti* and *Purusa* is revealed. *Prakriti* is active and when aroused, she becomes aggressive, almost beyond control, her destructive power can only be curbed by the benign presence of *Purusa*, who remains passive; the figure of Shiva is just a smiling presence, has no action attached to it. Yet, *Prakriti* cools down, she submits and then she becomes the domesticated wife, the controlled *Shakti*. Thus, beauty and calmness is attached to *Purusa* and not to *Prakriti*, whose beauty can be of the terrifying kind.

'The earth, *Prithvi*, was the ready, heated female body, seeking the soothing and fertilizing seminal rains of the sky god *Indra*' (Caldwell, 1999: 104). The earth goddess, Prithvi, must be nourished on the dead bodies of decomposing organic matter and then cooled by the rains (symbolizing semen of the sky god) to become fertile and benign. This theme is specifically found in Dravidian poetry of the *Sangam* period, where there is an imputed relationship between 'agricultural fertility, human sexuality, and the necessity of death for the continuance of life' (ibid.: 112). Thus, as a human being in female form, she must be cooled by marriage and only then she becomes the