Modernity for Urban Millenial Women in India: A Multiple Viewpoints Construct

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Abstract

This research paper challenges the controversial construct of the modern Indian woman by using the self-articulations of twenty millennial women in the tier-2 and tier-3 Indian cities, however, of upper middle and middle classes. It is based on cognitive linguistic viewpoint theories and Barbara Dancygier idea of decompression, where the question is: (1) How do these women identify modernity? (2) Are they modern? and (3) What are the background assumptions to these identifications? Results indicate that modernity is equated by respondents first with autonomy, independence and the power of making decisions and that all respondents identify themselves as modern. But a closer examination reveals a more subtle restructuring: they assert personal control, but also recognise the role of family and internalized gender expectations and often justify them as safety or healthy. This creates a two-sided construal- modernity as self-reliance and modernity as uninhibited breaking of social norms. The subjects identify with the former (Self) and dissociate themselves with the latter (Other) thus reconstituting modernity as conditional and socially negotiated. The research finds that modernity among these women is not absolute or radical but hybrid, in search of empowerment, not in the direction of the outside but in the direction of the inside, patriarchal structures. In such way, modern Indian woman becomes an elusive, situation-specific identity through the struggles of competing perspectives and sociocultural negotiations.

Keywords: *Modernity, Indian Women, Viewpoint, Identity, Patriarchy.*

Introduction

The term 'woman' has been defined from multiple perspectives that have taken into consideration biological and social aspects. Feminists have traditionally made the distinction between sex and gender, sex referring to the biological features that characterize a woman, and gender referring to the social role she starts playing because of her bringing up in the society in a certain way. The term 'modern Indian woman' is widely used today in our country, a term propelled by the media and by feminists alike, and at times, used for deviant interests by fanatic groups to propel their own causes.

It would be hard to find an educated woman in India who, on being asked if she is a 'modern Indian woman', would retort with a 'no' instead of an affirmation. However, it is imperative to question who defines what 'modernity' means to women in India. Who sets the bars for who is modern and who is not? In the light of choice feminism, every woman has the right to define modernity for herself on her own terms. Thus, the definition of a 'modern Indian

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woman' is essentially non-static and coloured by the perceptions and ideologies of the speaker, and takes into account its connotative aspects.

This study deals with the nuances of the term 'modern Indian woman' in today's India and examines the perspectives from which the concept of 'modernity' is constructed in the minds of Indian women themselves. However, these perspectives are also determined by demographic variables such as age, region, social class and so on. For the purpose of this study, we specifically look at the perspectives of urban middle and upper-middle class millennial women from tier-2 and tier-3 cities in India. Urban Indian existence is often equated with existence in tier-1 cities in India, while there is much lesser visibility for people from tier-2 and tier-3 cities. Our choice of interviewing urban women from tier-2 and tier-3 cities stems from an understanding of this bias, and is an attempt to make these women visible and their perspectives heard.

While understanding how these women construct the concept of 'modernity' on their own terms, it is imperative to understand that defining a concept always involves the twin perspectives of explanation and delimitation. While the process of subjectification helps understand a concept better by outlining its characteristics, it also limits it in the sense that these characteristics start becoming the felicity conditions for the concept. That is, if X has properties a, b and c, anything that has properties a and b but not c, or b and c but not a, or c and a but not b will fail to qualify as X. Thus, in trying to understand the concept of 'modernity' for these women, there is always the risk of excluding others who may not fit into the narrative of the majority. However, despite this flaw of delimitation, attempting a definition is the closest one can go to understanding a concept, and identifying the various perspectives from which it can be looked at. Therefore, while acknowledging its possible loopholes, this study attempts to examine and cross-examine the concept of 'modernity' as construed by these women in an attempt to understand how they define themselves and choose to be viewed by the society.

Literature Review

In order to understand modernity from the perspectives of these women, we need to understand how viewpoints are structured in narration. In their book Viewpoint in Language: A Multimodal Perspective, editors Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser have discussed viewpoint and perspective with reference to language and gesture and compiled works on viewpoint phenomena, multiple viewpoints and their roles in construction and discourse. Barsalou et al. (2005) and Barsalou (2010) have shown how language prompts brain simulations, which are necessarily viewpointed, 'because the experiences on which they are

based are necessarily viewpointed' (Sweetser, 2012). The mental spaces framework provides a means to represent these viewpoint phenomena because mental spaces of the perceiver or cogniser necessarily structure viewpoints. Sweetser (2012) defines a mental space as 'a partial and conceptual representation which can be mapped onto or combined with other such spaces to build complex conceptual structure'. There is no base reality to which the speaker's understanding of a concept can be compared; every person's understanding of a concept is based on cognitive models of the world based on embodied experience. Reading the same story can result in different cognitive representation in the minds of different individuals, that is, language is only a prompt for space-building; a richer cognitive representation is achieved only in interaction with the speaker's knowledge base and space-combining abilities. He further emphasizes that humans can embed mental spaces and hold contradictory spaces in mind simultaneously, thereby making it possible to hold contradicting viewpoints at the same time. Such contradicting viewpoints can result in varied definitions of the same term or concept. Since the same individual can hold contradicting viewpoints, it is possible for the same individual to come up with multiple definitions for the same term.

For the purpose of this study, we would draw from Dancygier (2012) who shows how a single participant attempts to represent multiple viewpoints without adding discourse participants. He explains how different viewpoints need not necessarily indicate different individuals, because the same individual can hold multiple mental spaces simultaneously in his mind and therefore come up with multiple viewpoints. Viewpoint shifts can occur through the choice of diectics and lexical descriptors through the process of decompression of viewpoint, 'where an otherwise unified concept is decompressed to create additional loci for the profiling of additional viewpoints'. In this process, a single concept is decompressed into two competing construals representative of two different viewpoints, which adds depth to the narrative without requiring additional discourse participants. Construals refer to the way individuals perceive, comprehend and interpret the world around them. Decompression indicates the availability of other viewpoints, yet these viewpoints are construed from the point of view of the narrator himself or herself and is not attributed to any other discourse participant. It is, hence, the narrator's comment on the various perspectives available and is related to narrative construction rather than representation of discourse.

Through the process of decompression, one of the two construals assumes the position of the Self, to which the speaker aligns himself or herself, as opposed to the Other, from which there is a deliberate attempt at distancing oneself. The notion of Self and Other is closely linked to those of identity and difference. It deals with such binaries of differences which involves a relationship of power, of inclusion and exclusion, in that one member of the pair is empowered with a positive identity, the Self, and the other side of the equation becomes the

subordinated Other. The dominant Self with its superiority always enjoys the flexible positional superiority by setting up the Other against itself. However, it so happens that the immediate competitor of the Self is inherently accredited with inferiority, a natural defectiveness. The Other, from its inception, is already demarcated as the incidental, inessential entity as opposed to the Self who is considered to be the norm, the absolute. The Self, being the absolute, defines the Other and segregates it to a predestined category. The dominant Self labels the Other as inferior within a state of affairs that has been created by the Self itself. The concept of the Other was first used by the German philosopher GWF Hegel to convey the notion that human consciousness is incapable of perceiving itself without recognition from others. One can be the Self only when there is an inferior 'Other' against which the Self can define itself. Thus, when viewpoint shift occurs within the narration of a single individual, decompression of a single construal results in two competing construals representing the Self and the Other, which the narrator respectively aligns herself to or distances herself from.

Objectives

The term 'modern Indian woman' is naturalised and freely used in the sense that when one uses it in common speech, an explanation about the term is not necessarily elicited from the speaker. However, breaking the term apart, it may be observed that the term is severely viewpointed. The head of the noun phrase 'woman' is itself a term that evades absolute subjectification. Should women be defined on the basis of sex to a certain extent or should anyone who identifies as feminine be considered a woman? For the purpose of this study, we keep the distinction between gender and sex intact, and consider anyone identifying as feminine a 'woman'. The word 'modern' is again deictic in nature in the sense that it draws its meaning depending on context—what was modern a decade back is dated today and what is modern today will be dated a decade later. The word 'Indian', though apparently denotative of an origin in the country India, is also a term which is ideology-laden in the postcolonial, postmodern era and in the light of nationalism and neonationalism. Does holding or not holding Indian citizenship legally qualify or disqualify someone as Indian or is Indianness defined by a sense of nationality and patriotism for the country? Narrowing down Indianness for the purpose of our study, our respondents include women born and brought up in India in tier-2 and tier-3 cities. Again, the structure of the phrase 'modern Indian woman' is ambiguous in itself: is 'modern' a qualifier for 'woman' and 'Indian' a classifier for 'woman'? Or is 'modern' a qualifier for 'India' and 'modern Indian' a classifier phrase for 'woman'? That is, which entity in the phrase does modern refer to: India or woman? Are modern Indian women refer to only those Indian women who are 'modern' in their outlook or does the phrase include any and every woman in modern India?

This study attempts to understand the concept of a modern Indian woman from the perspective of the subjectified, that is, women in India themselves. It also aims to reveal the viewpoints that might underlie their responses. The responses of the women are analysed using Dancygier's tool of decompression of a viewpoint into two competing construals, where one emerges as the Self that is aligned to and another as the Other that is distanced from.

Methodology

This study involved individually interviewing twenty urban middle and upper-middle class millennial women from tier-2 and tier-3 cities in India. The interviewees included working women as well as women preparing for government jobs. The interviewees belong in the age group 25 to 33. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or via telephonic conversation with the interviewees. Each interviewee defined the concept of a 'modern Indian woman' in her own terms and assessed herself as a woman who could claim herself to be modern, not modern or somewhere in-between. The interview was structured primarily in English but for the convenience of the interviewees, the questions were translated to Hindi or Bengali if necessary, and the replies elicited in English and/or Hindi/Bengali. The interview comprised of seven questions:

1. How would you define a 'modern Indian woman'?

2. Do you see yourself as a 'modern Indian woman'?

3. Do you think, as a woman in India, you have the right to your own decisions and lifestyle?

4. Have you ever been taught to behave like a woman? If so, share your experiences.

5. How much have you been pressurised by your family to abide by the typical norms of being a woman?

6. What is your take on the responsibility of a woman in the family?

7. How do you see yourself as adhering to or deviating from the concept of a 'modern Indian woman'?

As is evident above, the second and seventh questions of the interview sought the same answer in different words: whether the participants viewed themselves as and aligned to the concept of a modern Indian woman.

The responses of the interviewees were recorded using a mobile recorder and used for the purpose of analysis.

Research Findings

An analysis of the responses shows certain common patterns in the interviews of all the participants. While the interviews were conducted individually, there is striking similarity in the perspectives shared by these women. This is possibly owing to the controlling of demographic variables of the interviewees making their life experiences somewhat similar to each other.

It is found that the first question "How would you define a 'modern Indian woman'?" met with replies that roughly defined a modern woman as an independent woman who has the right to make her own choices and take her own decisions. To the interviewees, the word 'modern' majorly indicated 'free', and a modern woman meant someone capable of having autonomy in her own life. The target population being millennial women, this response possibly stems from their experience of seeing their own mothers and women of the previous generation often lacking this sense of autonomy in their lives—something they desperately try to attain for themselves.

The second question "Do you see yourself as a 'modern Indian woman'?" was answered positively by all participants: they were absolutely affirmative in replying that they classed themselves as modern Indian women, their affirmation indicated by markers of emphasis such as 'of course', 'bilkul' (Hindi: absolutely) and 'zarur' (Hindi: surely). This affirms that these women find modernity an essential and obvious part of their identity. They most definitely want to be recognised as modern Indian women.

In response to the third question "Do you think, as a woman in India, you have the right to your own decisions and lifestyle?" the respondents opined that their actions and decisions are, to a considerable extent, governed and restricted by the wishes of their family. Some of these respondents are married and many of them are single; however, they all felt that their families most definitely govern their life decisions and actions to some extent. It is interesting to note that some respondents also rationalised this control by stating that this might be for their best interests while others simply stated that this is something they have had to accept as women. So, while they identify strongly as modern Indian women, their modernity is still bound by a sense of answerability to the family as women, and is at best, a more autonomous version of their mothers.

The fourth question "Have you ever been taught to behave like a woman? If so, share your experiences." met with varied and interesting responses. While some respondents clearly denied any such overt teaching in their houses, others came up with instances where they were asked to talk less loudly, not laugh aloud, or not shake their legs unnecessarily while

sitting. Interestingly, some of the respondents again rationalised their replies, coming up with affirmations such as 'obviously', 'aisa karna bhi chahie' (Hindi: it is rightly done), or 'sahi hai' (it's only right). Such responses from majority of the interviewees reflect the degree of ingrained patriarchy still prevalent in middle and upper-middle class families in tier-2 and tier-3 cities in India, and the psychological indoctrination of women to believe in these set gender norms as ideal code of conduct for themselves even in the 21st century.

The fifth question "How much have you been pressurised by your family to abide by the typical norms of being a woman?" was answered with a higher degree of rationalisation of the control a woman's family exerts in her life. While most unmarried women opined that their families did not vex them about marriage right away, a lot of them were of the opinion that they, of course, needed to get married once they feel financially stable and expecting that would not be wrong on part of their parents. After all, there were younger brothers and sisters to worry about. Married women spoke about their families expecting them to bear children, including their own families as well as in-laws, and most women considered this a normal progression post marriage that is a fair expectation of women. They rationalised this by stating that it is biologically important not to delay childbirth post a certain age, and believed that the expectation of motherhood is a normal and acceptable expectation for women in their families. Except only three women, others emphasised that night-outs were not allowed for women in their houses, and they needed to return home in time, but at the same time, they opined that this was a decision for their benefit, a decision their parents, spouses and families took for their own safety. It is seen that most respondents safeguard their families from the blame of 'pressurising' them to follow gender norms, they do end up acknowledging unwritten gender norms and expectations in their families, but claim to be complicit in these decisions because they believe it is for their own benefit and well-being. This sheds further light on the psychological indoctrination of women in households that offer them growth opportunities but within a patriarchal framework that still privileges men, so much so that these women start believing that the control exercised on them and the boundaries set for them are for their best interests, as a respondent claimed, 'Yeh cheezein lakshman rekha ki tarha hoti hai'. (Hindi: These rules are safety nets for our ownselves.)

When asked "What is your take on the responsibility of a woman in the family?" the replies were in two veins. Some women believed that it is the woman's responsibility to hold a family together, to manage both her work and family alike. This places unfair burden on women that they have naturalised in their own psyche—the idea that household work for women is never optional; if a woman wants a career for herself, that work must be an add-on. The other respondents believed that the responsibility to work for the family should be equal for both men and women, but they also acknowledged that most families in India put the burden

unfairly on the woman's shoulder alone. Two respondents with children claimed that while their partners were supportive, they needed to shoulder the major responsibilities of bringing up their children.

By the time the interviewees encountered the last question "How do you see yourself as adhering to or deviating from the concept of a 'modern Indian woman'?" they had time enough to construe a clear picture of their notion of a modern Indian woman, through voicing their opinions about related issues of womanhood in the earlier questions. They had decided her affiliations, and were prepared to answer the second question from a reviewed perspective. This is where the respondents replied in a way markedly different from the second response: they no longer placed themselves in the category of modern Indian women, but rather claimed they were not so, in the typical sense of the term. At best, they could claim to be somewhere between modern and not modern, because they could only align themselves only to a partial definition of a modern Indian woman. They were women with financial independence, or women preparing to be financially independent, but they were women who were, at the same time, bound by a certain degree of control of their family. They chose to adhere to a moderate version of a family-bound modernity, reminiscent of Black feminism, and distance themselves from the definition of modernity in an extremist vein, which involved the flouting of social norms, and indicated an uninhibited life of no restraint, which they indicated by 'night-outs, smoking, drinking, live-in relationships' and so on. Thus, the interviews witnessed a marked shifting of viewpoint from the second to the seventh question, where the same question, put in different terms elicited markedly different responses from the interviewees. The women chose to identify as modern within an Indian societal framework that is essentially patriarchal, in such a way that their brand of modernity remained acceptable and did not stand at sharp contrast to prevalent societal norms. In choosing autonomy for themselves, they were not ready to completely stand against the society they grew up in, but find a path of moderation that would allow them freedom while adhering to societal expectations.

Discussion

The shift in viewpoint from the second to the seventh question may be attributed to the discussions of related issues of womanhood in the intervening questions which gave the interviewees a chance to review their own views of a modern Indian woman in greater depth. When they answered the second question, they answered it from the first perspective that came naturally to them on hearing the term 'modern Indian woman'. This construal represented an image of a self-reliant autonomous woman of free will and individuality of thoughts, opinions and actions. In light of this definition, they aligned themselves with the

concept, affirming that they believed themselves to be modern Indian women. However, by the time they reached the seventh question, they had thought of the concept from other perspectives as well. They no longer claimed to be modern Indian women with the same affirmation as before, and instead placed themselves somewhere between being modern and not modern. In their responses, they still clung to the idea of being a woman of individual thoughts and opinions, but they did not want to be viewed as an uninhibited woman flouting societal norms: a woman who is always entitled to her own wills and may live a life of no constraints including smoking, drinking or night parties. They wanted to be considered modern keeping within social boundaries, but they defied being modern if modernity meant lack of restraint. So, in their choice of self-image, they construed themselves as modern within defined bounds, ensuring that their modernity remained in sync with the idea of a 'good woman' in the society. Thus, the unified concept of a modern Indian woman was decompressed into two competing construals - the independent self-reliant woman versus the uninhibited woman - and then re-compressed into the narrative structure of the same individual. The respondents aligned themselves with the socially positive connotations of the term 'modern' representing self-reliance, autonomy, and individuality while distancing themselves from the socially tabooed connotations of a defiant woman representing uninhibited action, ultramodernity or its cosmetic overdoing. Thus the construal representing the socially positive connotations of the term emerges as the Self to which the interviewees aligned while the construal representing the socially tabooed connotations of the term emerges as the Other from which the interviewees distanced themselves. They chose to be modern, but their modernity came with conditions that do not flout gender expectations that seem fair to them having grown up in their society. This shift in viewpoint from being emphatic about their modernity to only conforming to the socially positive connotations of modernity while distancing themselves from the socially tabooed ones affirms Dancygier's concept of multiple viewpoints in the narrative structure of the same individual, where one construal is privileged over the other. These women, in their choice of being 'modern' in only one of the ways rather than the other resonate a kind of moderation that reminds one of Black feminism that distanced itself from radical White feminist beliefs. Modernity for most Indian millennial women in tier-2 and tier-3 cities thus emerges as a choice that seeks liberation, not from, but within, the bounds of the Indian society. The concept of 'modernity' rather than being a linear one, is constructed by women themselves through conflicting construals and multiple viewpoints as complex and hybrid—one that seeks autonomy within defined societal gender norms. These competing construals of socially positive and negative connotations of modernity are re-compressed into the same narrative structure to create a more layered identity for these women on their own terms. Ultimately, through their narratives, they emerge as their chosen version of modern Indian women—the ones who blend autonomy

with social acceptance and assert their femininity within the bounds of Indian society, family structure and gender expectations. In doing so, they redefine modernity in their own context instead of understanding it through set lenses, and structure their sense of being and social identity based on their own definition.

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