PROBING THE PROBLEMATICS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY: AN INTERCULTURAL APPROACH TO CRITICAL DISCOURSES ON BODY IN THE COLONIAL BENGALI MAGAZINE NARA-NAREE

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Abstract: The construction of body in India is an ambiguous discursive process and this paper attempts to answer the following key questions clinched in the colonial monthly Bengali magazine Nara-Naree [Man-Woman]: What was the relationship of knowledge, power and sexuality among genders in colonial India? How was gender difference constituted in colonial Bengal? How did cloth define the disparity between nature and culture? How were the objects of consciousness regarding genders developed in social contexts? How did the surveillance and control over the body construct the “ideal sexual behavior”? How were the paradigms of health, psychology, nature, culture, science, morality, modernity, tradition and history integrated into the gender framework which assert the reconstruction of femininities, masculinities and sexualities? How did the rhetoric of body and sexuality in colonial Bengal become contested site of discourses as well as a device to construct a national and cultural identity? How did body become a tool of control and a territory for inscribing critical observations, the content to be evaluated and a device to reform the structure and boundary between imperial and national binaries? How did the subcultures and transgender identities form new sexual attitudes subverting the homogeneous and hegemonic hierarchy in the east-west relations and transnational settings?

Keywords: sexual identity, body politics, culture, cloth, east-west dialectics, hegemonic norms, subversion

Introduction

Nature-nurture debate and conceptualization of gender and sexuality are part of the broader spectrum where culture is posed as an antithesis to nature and sexual values are conceived as important components of all cultures, though societies may differ widely in attributing meanings to sex, sexual identity and sexual permissiveness. Despite their infinite variety within each culture, some broad generalities can be identified, and these commonalities and differences in sexual behaviors are determined by cultural and psychological contexts and engagement in social comparison and dialogue:

Every culture […] is engaged in the process of generating and sustaining systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artifacts, etc.) […] every culture implicitly recognizes and asserts a distinction between the operation of nature and the operation of culture […] the distinctiveness of culture rests precisely on the fact that it can […] transcend natural conditions and turn them to its purposes. Thus culture (i.e every culture) at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature […] it is always culture’s project to subsume and transcend nature. (Ortner, 1974, p. 72)
The vernacular Bengali magazine *Nara-Nareein* colonial India registers this integral conflict, maintaining the "fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality" (Foucault, 1990). Nature-culture and male-female analogy is also explicitly and differently developed where female/male contrast is understood as a further metaphoric transformation of an allegedly universal nature-culture contrast (Ardener, 1975; Ortner, 1974). When women are defined as ‘natural’ a high prestige or even moral ‘goodness’ is attached to men’s domination over women, analogous to the ‘goodness’ of human domination of natural or libidinal energy, thereby linking nature with wildness and femaleness. Women are the repository of ‘natural laws’ and ‘natural morality’ while curbing urges in accordance with moral codes is held in high esteem (MacCormack, 1980, p. 6). In addition, neither the concept of nature nor that of culture is ‘given’, and they cannot be free from the biases of the culture in which the concepts were constructed (Ardener, 1978). Although femaleness is universally rooted in biology and maleness in social domain (Ardener, 1975; Beauvoir, 1953; Ortner, 1974; Strauss, 1969), the nature-culture-gender paradigm always involves tension of a kind and is understood as a continuum or process rather than dichotomous static distinctions. So the meanings attributed to male and female are as arbitrary as are the meanings attributed to nature and culture, as male can become female and female can choose to change their heteronormative sexual identity with the intervention of science and sex-reassignment surgery. Thus, gender is actively produced as an accomplishment within social interactions through “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes... appropriate for one’s sex category” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.127) and the performance of gender varies in the given context of time, space, social interaction and interrogation, gender being simultaneously created and maintained as “both a process and a product, medium and outcome of such power relations” (Mumby, 1998, p.169).

**Objective**

The objective of the paper is to analyze the dialectics of nature and culture in the construction of gendered identity in east-west encounter in colonial Bengal as exemplified in the vernacular magazine *Nara-Naree*. The principal purport is to address the overt points of contradictions and dichotomies in the process of negotiating, delimiting and disciplining sexuality: social construction of gender and culturally controlled sexual expression, incontinence and subculture, subaltern sexuality and sexual orientation, west as a reference point and deconstruction of institutionalized gender hierarchy, political body and body politics, global modernity and indigenous tradition, transculturation, transgression, hiatus and synthesis. So, the purpose is to psychoanalytically probe deep into the cross-culture of desire and anxieties and articulate the ways in which issues of gender, sexuality and nationalism are intertextually and intersectionally interlinked, situated and problematized in the larger political backdrop of the magazine which locates how subaltern identity is embodied and embedded in conjunction with and contradiction to nationalist ideas, expounding the art and science of aesthetic and physical body that theorizes problematic sexuality in mapping the dispute-ridden domain.

**Locating Nature-Culture-Gender Dichotomy in Colonial Domain**

In the nature-culture-gender constructs one domain is open to control or colonization by the other and like these ideological dialectics, colonial regimes are also always in process, subject to disruption and contest, conceived as ‘unfinished business’ (Burton, 1999). Gendered and sexualized social orders produced by such regimes are equally precarious where social, political and cultural ideologies engage to control the domain of sexuality, especially women’s bodies (and men’s as well) and in this sense gender and sexuality become highly contingent systems of power in the dimensions of socio-political arena.

In the nationalistic ideologies in Colonial India, masculinity seemed to be indispensable for the formation of the virile nation. Sexual, social, moral and cultural components find amalgamation and body is constructed as the sign and metaphor of the embryonic country striving to set a resistance to the oriental stereotype of “effeminate male” (Sinha, 1995) propounded by the colonial projects of domination, power and subordination. So, anxieties about male sexuality and manhood were a part of this process, whereby it became crucial to control women through the notions of obscenity, immorality and the “other” (Gupta, 2001). This identity politics also sought to break the “conspiracy of silence” (John & Nair, 1998) in public and private, as body became a domain of discursive doctrines where sexuality was to be reshaped, moulded and controlled.
Colonial engagement was critical in setting off a reflexive and self-critical change in gender system (John & Nair, 1998; Uboeri, 1996). Cultural and intellectual history of the colonial period in India also highlighted the centrality of the feminine in the symbolic representation of an Indian national identity (Nandy, 1983; Sangari & Vaid, 1989). Conversely the attributes of modern Indian femininity were also actively negotiated at this time and it became an interesting dialogue in which both rulers and ruled actively participated. A reconstructive contestation resulted between the British and the Bengali male intelligentsia whose object were the “woman question” and “the new Bengali woman” (Chatterjee, 1989) and it extended to reconsider women in this formative process of subjectivities and agency. Therefore, body came at the centre of a wider social system and was brought into the sphere of politics in a powerful and explicit way. While re-organizing the fundamental societal relations and forms of power, it took into account the educated section of Bengali elite Bhadramahila (gentlewoman) as a part of the civil society who tried to carve out a space of their own. Offering an ideological justification for the selective appropriation of western discourses the nationalists sought a specific site of resistance for Indian cultural identity while fighting for independence. The constitutive dilemma between the world and the home lay at the heart of this nationalist project. Women, it was supposed, would need to have some idea of the world outside home, into which she could venture as long as it did not threaten the culturally determinate femininity set by socially approved male and female conduct. Rhetorical agency of organized women started consolidating a new nationalist modernity and as Partha Chatterjee (1989) suggested, in this ‘nationalist resolution’ of the women’s question the home/world dichotomy involved both emancipation of women and self-emancipation by women, governed by the need to be ‘different yet modern’. The "domain set by differences", clearly marked the Hindu middle-class Bengali woman distinct from the Western woman and control over the body is endorsed to construct the “ideal sexual behavior” which is marked by the advocate’s race, ethnicity, class and gender affiliations. With the need to build stronger masculine bodies in the face of imperial onslaught, public discussions on sexuality became directly linked to the individuals, the society and the nation as a whole.

Nara Naree: The Only Bengali Journal on Health, Hygiene, Sex

Nara-Naree[Man-Woman], the Bengali monthly magazine is edited by Sunil Kumar Dhar, sub-edited by Srimati Mira Sanyal and published by Sukantakumar Halder with the co-ordination of a honorary advisory board consisting of Dr. D. R. Dhar, Dr. Benoy Sinha, Dr. B. K. Goswami and Dr. Sudhamadhab Sengupta. These noted personalities were well equipped with sharpened intercultural vision combining eastern and western scholarship and their joint venture made the comparative study as the focal point of the magazine.

The contributors form part of the expert doctors, scientists, eminent social critics, veteran social reformers, esteemed litterateurs, poets, philosophers, columnists, essayists, psychologists, artists, athletes, swimmers and erudite scholars and numerous western references are juxtaposed with acknowledged Indians. The twelve issues (1939-40) contain specific sections on beautification and make-up, physical exercise, cinema, while health and sex related queries and counselling are under the columns ‘Doctor’ and ‘Prescription’ and other snippets incorporating important messages, scientific information, new invention, events and humour appear in the column named ‘Sankalan’ in every month.

Nara Naree represents the inherent paradox in the paradigms of gender, health and sexuality in colonial Bengal by registering the debate on 'Indian' and 'western' discourses on body, as articulated by the elite medical circles and emergent middle class. A new level of public discussion formed part of the dialogue with political, social and epistemological challenges posed by the colonial rule. As Sudipta Kaviraj (2002) argued, nineteenth century witnessed an ‘extraordinary proliferation of associations’ amongst elite, educated circles in India, and especially Bengal. Amongst a very restricted group of people, there arose a ‘new spirit [and] access to the means to try out new ways of living’ (p. 117).

Creation of Indian Male and Female Bodies

Nara Naree champions sexual vitality by citing the enchanting buxom beauty of Hindu mythological apsaras (courtisans) and masculine male gods, juxtaposing sensuous and heavenly beauty of Urvasi with sturdy physique.
The imperative for maintaining women's beauty, sexuality and health addressed the importance of physical flexibility through exercise (Chattopadhyay, 1940, p.149; Halder, 1940b, p. 497; P. Mukhopadhyay, 1940, p. 356) by dissipating the western and Indian myths and prejudices against sports that diminish feminine charm. But there was a perceived difference in the conception of gendered physical culture. While men's sports were concentrated on making iron-built body, women's sports are directed towards preserving feminine grace. So, construction of men and women's bodies includes several factors to create rectangular broad-chested males and curvaceous females who need to balance the elements of modesty and eroticism. Various visuals and biographies of skilled and muscular athletes and female swimmers (from Europe, America, India, and Bengal in particular) are projected emphasizing on the significance and maintenance of beauty, physical health and exercise, along with advertisements of aphrodisiacs, hair oil, nutritious food, information about ‘body brushing’ or massage in American parlours(C. Debi, 1940, p. 417).

Indian and western encounter about the concept of the body rests on the differential male gaze-oriented perspective where western image is often set against Indian full-bosomed and feminine beauty paragon (Chakraborty, 1940). Women’s sports also raise the same anxiety about the structure of native feminine soft body which is counterposed with masculine strong physique as well as western stout female body (P. Mukhopadhyay, 1940).
"Beauty cannot be quantified or objectively measured; it is the result of the judgments of others" (Saltzberg & Chrisler, 1997). Descriptions and prescriptions of beauty vary among cultures and historical periods, weighed by the socio-cultural construction with a marked emphasis on the vividly antithetical characteristics of 'feminine' and 'masculine' attributes and features, capacities and characteristics. In medieval Europe women’s ‘beauty culture’ was highly criticized as perfumes and cosmetics were thought to be used as a mask to attract men aggravating moral laxity and promiscuity among women (C. Debi, 1940). Indian beauty and clothing styles have continuously evolved through the course of history. Various body decorations stress on constructing a distinction between wives and seductive beloveds depending on the quality of mesmerizing beauty in attracting lovers. Ancient Sanskrit texts of Kalidas mentioned clothes made from barks and leaves, dyed and embroidered garments and highlighted the later development of ‘aesthetic science’ and make-up with western manufacturing techniques and modernized beauty clinics (C. Debi, 1940).

In “Narir Rup o vongi” Shailachakraborty (1940) analyzed the ‘acceptable’ form of Indian female beauty, setting a parameter to judge western and traditional beauty ideals. Every society throughout history has had standards of beauty and various parts of the body are speculated, measured and the ratios of the measurements are mapped upon it. While he disapproved of the ‘slim and trim’ image and hailed pre-colonial ancient Indian beauty paragons as in Kalidas’s Sanskrit poetry, he also made a clear distinction between masculine physique and feminine sexual attractiveness with the determination of appropriate shape of enticing female body.

Western cosmetic beauty is selectively chosen and simultaneously set against to resist the colonial forces of desire for constituting the post-colonial Indian modernity. Application of western discourses and criticism of west both are juxtaposed (Doctor, 1939; Sen 1940; S. Nandy, 1940). The comparative study and the perceived dissociation in the approach refer to the partial selection of western theories which can be used for modernization of Indian system, rejecting others which can flout native social tradition and morality. Western system of co-education and Russian ‘comradeship’ (M. Debi, 1940b) made an impact which encouraged equal participation of women in sex education and dissipation of birth control information (Bhattacharya, 1940; P. Mukhopadhyay, 1939; D. Mukhopadhyay, 1940, p. 123). There are also sharp criticisms of westernization which is thought to be the primary reason for Bengali’s subordination as a race and attempts are made to raise awareness about the ‘Injudicious indiscriminate apish imitation [which is] diametrically opposite as the East and the West, as regards habits and modes of living, food and drinks, climate and clothings’ (Sen, 1940). Indian female body was thought to wrap itself up in ‘modest’ sari with hairstyles revolving around traditional and experimental designs which were juxtaposed alongside the references of make-overs with scientific aid in western beauty shops (C. Debi, 1940).

This problematization of liberal reform is further questioned by both Indian and western subcultures. While this production of filtered knowledge leans on western critical discourses through careful induction by the indigenous parameter, it reveals the existence of a potentially strong subculture and this subaltern sexuality intends to thwart all Indo-western hegemonic social definitions of sexual identity.

**Morality is Materialistic: the Naked Body**

Clothing is closely linked to the notions of the body and male and female body is constructed by the cultural perception of their different dressing styles. So, discourses on nudism seem to be problematic in its socio-religious doctrines, cultural and moral dialectics. In ‘Lajja’ (D. Mukhopadhyay, 1940) and ‘Tanu o Atanu’ (P. Roy, 1940a) the rhetoric of sexualized/non-sexualized and personal/social nudity is debated. While nudity is considered as physically and psychologically beneficial, seeking wider acceptance in private and appropriate public settings, the overt sexual connotations are also inescapable. Contestation about nudism begins as early as the Biblical account of Genesis in the Old Testament, with the tasting of the forbidden fruit by Adam and Eve, leading to the discovery of their nakedness and banishment from paradise which entails an unspoken prohibition on the knowledge and exploration of one’s own body and sexuality. The public exposure to nudity and voyeurism originate from the legend of Lady Godiva, and Peeping Tom was a tailor who chanced to see the nude lady through a peephole. So nudism remains polarized with contingent polemics and contrasting theoretical paradigms about whether to champion nudism as a radical sexual reform or decry it as an invasion into privacy.
The fundamental ambiguity also emanates from the dualist position of Nara-Nareethat it tends to make a move forward and have a dialogue with other cultures while at the same time views complete assimilation as a threat to the indigenous culture.

DebdasMukhopadhyay (1940) attempted to define the notion of shame and its inextricable relation with clothing which vary across cultures, customs, ages and civilizations. Cultural encounters and resulting dialogues elaborate the concept by linking western socio-political and sexual ideologies with the free flowing orient. Sanskrit poet Kalidas’s unbridled expression of explicit sexuality and sensuality examines the comparative concept of “obscenity” as a relative term which varies across ages (P. 124).

Nudity as a normal condition has prevailed throughout the history, from complete nakedness to casual body covering, from prehistoric times through the Greco-Roman and Indian civilizations. In second and third century B.C there were public baths in Greece and Rome as a medium of social contact and men and women used to take bath in the same hall. The interminable link between chastity and nudity is also brought to the fore as nudism is believed to dissolve of all kinds of differences unlike clothes which hide the body and thereby incite carnal desire. Here nudism again is an antithesis to the “gendered body” as the author cited a scholar “Nakedness among the savage people did much less to entice them to lasciviousness than our women’s clothes” (qtd in p. 125) and thus stressed on the cultural construction of femininity through clothing. These body-image issues also focus on the everlasting endeavour of women to please men by adorning themselves in various ways and thus cloth becomes a tool of gaze rather than a cover for the body. So nudism is a resistance to the hierarchical view of body and absolves gender differences by shedding cloth, the major social hindrance against improved body image. He referred to the sexual subculture as evidenced in the nudist colonies which flout embarrassment and contradict the puritanical laws of decency. Sun bathing, started in Switzerland, used to serve as a viable treatment for bone tuberculosis. Thus nature and science is interlinked. Nudism has also an indelible impact on aesthetics, art and artists. He glorified human body as professed in the Hellenistic art and suggested to shun Victorian orthodoxy by radical revolution. In the process of enculturation and acculturation nudism is evaluated as an acceptable or unacceptable trope within the framework of that society which reviews the countercultural rejection of the mainstream sexual and gender norms and associated hegemonic values.

Socialization of shame and modesty in the case of modern Adams and Eves has made nudity the byword for sin (P. Roy, 1940a) as puritans banned all suggestions of sexuality and kept their bodies fully clothed from head to toe. Putting off clothes during bathing was also not permissible. An incident was recounted when a girl was arrested barefoot on the beach in the pretext of violation of public decency for not covering her ankle. As a consequence of this social superimposition, nature started to revolt against the nexus of moral and cultural scruples and religious dogmas with the keyword “the nakedness of man is the work of God” (qtd in P. Roy, 1940a, p. 172). In 1900 there started ‘Nacktkultur’ or ‘Back to Nature Movement’ in Germany and during 1928 the total number of nudists and naturists were 60000 who were systematically persecuted under Nazi rule. Many tribal cultures have positive attitude towards nudity that troubled western explorers to confront the "embarrassment” of viewing complete nakedness which is dubbed as savage or inferior. But the wave of nudism had reached the elitist class of Europe, America and in England and 300 nudist clubs mushroomed.Pranab Roy (1940a) crystallized the logics of the nudists in Europe and America: 1) the half clad body is more alluring than fully nude, 2) nakedness is the artistic manifestation of the sacred as exemplified in the statue of Venus de Milo, 3) the therapeutic value of light as invented by Niles Finmen and testified in the sanatorium (situated in Switzerland) of Dr. Rollier (the writer of Sun Cure)espouse positive facets of nudism. So, cloth becomes ‘obscene’ and ‘unscientific’ while nudism improves mental and psychological fitness, good health by increasing immunity with exposure to sun (which is elaborated in Sun Cure), ‘haemobactericidal power’ (p.171) and a liberated moral-life view. He further quoted Havelock Ellis to hint at the idea of possible transculturation of subcultures when the successors of Godiva, Adam and Eve will flood the streets of Kolkata and fully clothed bodies will be ripped open and replaced by the godlike divine creature, the new moral messiah, advocating the blissful grace of nudism:

“Someday, perhaps, a new moral reformer a great apostle of purity will appear among us, having his scourge in his hands, and enter our theatres and music-halls to purge them.
It will not nakedness he will chaste out, it will more likely to be clothes” (qtd. in P. Roy, 1940a, p. 173).

Thus, the holistic approach towards sexuality does not segregate the physiological and psychological mechanics comprising a broad range of sexual expression and repression which vary across cultures and historical periods. Controlling sexuality is a major component of sexual politics and most societies set limits, through social norms and taboos, moral and religious guidelines or legal constraints for permissible sexual behavior while defining some sexual activities as inappropriate. But the subcultures of nudism, naturism, cross-dressing, homosexuality, transsexuality or transvestism remain compelling and unconstrained even under suppression.

Cloth Defines Nature and Identity: the Third Gender

The fundamental question about sexual orientation and gender identity is stressed by the biological bisexuality of fetus as hermaphroditism is the initial and innate stage according to Freud’s hypothesis (qtd. in Mitra, 1940, p.183). Through psycho-physiological development during puberty, the transition point, which includes both external and internal factors, one becomes monosexual, while bisexuality remains latent before a fixed, usually hetero-sexual identity takes hold. So in conformity with Freudian theory of ‘normal’ human development, same-sex desires are repressed or subdued and heterosexual traits arise, relegating homosexuality and bisexuality as the result of psychological malfunctions. On the contrary, modern science with the validation of chromosome theory highlights that sex of the child is determined at the very moment of conception during physical consummation. It is also presumed that “Infants are born of one sex” (Mitra, 1940, p. 186) though the distinctive traits remain latent till puberty and sometimes bisexual characteristics become predominant: “A person, who has distinctively male organs externally, can have the grand balance of a female and develop the secondary characteristics of a woman”. With instances of men taking up roles as women and vice versa in the stage shows, PremendraMitra (1940, p.183) blurs the boundary between sexes and interrogates the parameter for defining inversion or aberration and normalcy. In this regard he relates the story of Gretna whose gender identity was concealed under long hair and women’s vesture and doctors discovered “her” identity as a man only after an accident. On the other hand, there were cases of women in army barracks camouflaged in men’s clothes and veiled under military uniform. Many men (specially acrobats) cannot meet the expectations of female characters during theatre performances while others who swapped roles cannot be alienated from the “real” and the “reel” identity.

He questions the construction of gender and systematic essentialization of binary differences between natural and cultural, feminine and masculine behaviours and perceives them as the internalization of institutionalized roles. His social constructionist view subverts the nature-culture polarity and examines the intersection of multiple identities by blurring the boundary which determines genders as inherent, immutable or ingrained and typically opposite to each other. Deconstruction of these categories of gender, social traits and behaviours which are specified by hierarchical values indicates the disappearance of socially reinforced gendered identity releasing the nature within.

Thus, People are always performing gender and gender is always relevant in social situations. Hegemonic or dominant masculinity provides a code to normal and acceptable behaviors that conform to cultural conceptions as well as to those that deviate. Therefore, transsexuals going for a sex change operation must prove that they can “pass” as a man or a woman even while changing one’s gender. But Nature also revolts against scienceeven aftergender reassignment surgery. Sex replacement operation of BomelikaStayonaf, who wanted to be a male, met with failure as she discovered female physical characteristics and features being prominent again after some period. Her initial masculine transformation through scientific experiment could not survive against the natural law. This reference justifies the biologically determined nature as indisputable and exposes the deep-seated Indian anxiety about the preservation of ‘feminine nature’ in the onslaught of modernity.

Cross-dressing has been used for disguise, caricature, performing arts and as a literary trope throughout history but society made distinctions between male and female gender by the style, color, or type of clothing that they are expected to wear, and imposed a set of regulations. So institutionalized gender difference also involves colour of clothes as women wear more colourful garments, hence men wearing such clothes are ridiculed. But it
is pointed out that even puritans used to dress in red coats. At the same time, the author distanced himself from transvestic fetishism outlining his disgust at the ‘unnatural’ interest in wearing undergarments of opposite sex to derive erotic stimulation.

Institutionalization of socialized behaviour derogates men who cry or cook as these are deemed to be exclusive characteristics of women’s domain while women interested in angling, exhaustive physical exertion, smoking, cropping hair or thinking critically and logically are “like men” by overstepping the strictly traditional paradigm of power. These stereotypes controlling sexuality are further defied with the unprecedented observation: ‘Men disguising as women and using cosmetics are not abnormal. It’s a natural behaviour where the traits of one sex predominate’ (Mitra, 1940, p. 187). The author delved deep into the intricacies of psyche to unravel the riddle of sexual orientation and in conformity with the inversion theory of Freud opined that apathy of men towards women may be embedded in childhood if men are betrayed by heterosexual partners or suffer from lack of maternal love that may even lead to castration. Some of them withdraw from society resorting to transvestism and others exhibit effeminacy in adulthood or attraction towards masculine males. There is another paradigm in homosexuality which expounds that strong masculine men take pleasure in tender and young men in place of women as exemplified in the case of Spartans and turkeys who were homoerotic. Persons confined in army camps, temples or ships may also choose to commune with the same sex as this is evident in animals when segregated from females, and thus it makes the comparison with humans who are social animals. This stance is justified by P. Mitra (1940) with a western reference that sometimes “there is an actual defect in the reproductive organ [where] nature makes a mistake - though many homosexuals (perhaps who like their own sex) appear to be absolutely normal, at least internally (qtd in p. 184). The role of religion as an instrument is deeply embedded in the framework of sexuality:

even before 3000 years “effeminate” men thronged Babylon and surrounding places where they worshipped sexual symbols or organs. In some religious places women and men copulated to be blessed by God. In Bible also there is reference of such people living in Jerusalem but king Josiah persecuted the sodomites and transvestites. (Mitra, 1940, p. 185)

Concept of inversion is also widely varied depending on opinions of different psychologists, doctors and ancient authors who vindicated, supported or simultaneously rejected hereditary inversion. So homoeroticism can broadly be categorized in three denominations: physical deformity, habitual or natural activity and situational behaviour. The mistaken identity scandal of Lord Cornbury is cited in this regard. The Governor of New York who impersonated as a woman was arrested by police and later dismissed from the position to assuage the damage of royal image. Premendra Mitra (1940) further discussed how Europe and America came out of self-imposed inhibition on the subject and started dealing with the issue in theatre, drama, social gathering, literature and novels. Cross-dressing has become the part of a number of special occasions, seasonal festivals and religious spectacles and the inversion of sex roles that accompanies these public revels is enjoyed by the community as a form of social acceptance of the ‘other’. These masquerades, known as Art balls, also serve as the congregation place for homosexuals.

Transgression in the form of cross-dressing subverts the power structure of cultural meaning transferred on to the gender identity and is further extended beyond the hierarchies and boundaries with the inclusion of transsexuals, homosexuals and transvestites. Thus, cloth is an artifact, and specific styles of clothing illustrate the socially constructed ‘nature’ of gender and their cultural differences. Dress, worn outside the body, soon becomes part of the body with the cultural implications inscribed on it and exhibits the transactional relationship of body with the world (Suthrell, 2004, p. 14). Transvestism provides this link between material culture and gender and is a significant aid to understand the issues of dress, gender and sexuality.

**Conclusion**

In *Nara-Naree* the tension between nature, culture, gender and sexuality is ubiquitous. It begins with the primary contention that sexual natures are produced through the binary concepts of animal and human, nature and culture. Nature is seen as acting against and simultaneously complying with culture, while culture follows the ‘natural biological law’ and also deviates from it with scientific appropriation. So, this interaction and opposition
between nature and culture is further complicated by the instrument of science making judgments about gender and sexuality, its naturalness and unnaturalness.

Gender norms and categories are directly related to the distribution of power among genders, and power, in turn, relates to the control over both symbolic as well as material resources through the ideas about men and women—their ‘appropriate’ roles, capacities and characteristics in respect to their positions with each other. Hence, both symbolic and material processes are of crucial importance affecting social structures and conditions, as all social contexts are gendered. ‘Gender’ is, therefore, a relationship, with their relative relocation in the structures of hierarchy (Srivastava, 2004). The definition of normative sexuality involves a ‘pure’ masculine part and a ‘pure’ feminine part and these archetypal gender roles are products of social processes which shape ‘cultured’ sexuality. Nara-Naree also exemplifies the fact that those who are in power control discourses about the knowledge regarding sexuality, and this desire to control knowledge is essentially a desire to control power. Moreover, gender rarely operates alone; class, culture, race also combine to produce marked sexual differences among men and women and influence sexuality.

Cloth acts as a signifier and symbol for the dialogic construction of the body, as it is the visible part to assert identity where the self (body) ends and dress begins (Caplan, 1987). Clothing can also be functional by denoting respectability and attitudes, with desire to conform or rebel. It also imparts significant cultural information and indicates boundaries which surround and delineate these cultural gender markers. So, dress continually renegotiates its transactional relation to the body and the world with the intersection between material culture and gender and can be a tool to conform or rebel against social norms while transvestism crosses this sex/gender/sexuality barrier. Transgenderism, hermaphrodisim and homosexuality underscore the anxiety about ‘questionable’ sexual orientation and ‘moral’ conduct, as sexual subculture and subversion of ‘naturally’ gendered body and sexuality are perceived as antithetical to role-related performance. Sexual expression also varies widely from one culture to another and these differences include cultural views and behaviors concerning premarital and extramarital sexuality, contraception and birth control, transgender identity, genital modification methods and issues related to pleasure, sexual disease and danger.

Nara-Naree [Man-Woman] interlinks the discourse of pleasure and danger and suppression and appropriation of nature through culture while dealing with the aesthetics and science of sex and sexual identity. Bio-medical and psychoanalytic theories construe male and female bodies as sites of discourses, inscribing the intersection between colonial Bengal and the West and body becomes a text, trope, tool and terrain, constructed as the political object in nationalistic projects. Talk on sex and sexuality in the public realm constantly met with ambivalence in the regulated space and the paradox in the approach lies in the attempt by sexologists, psychologists and reformists to sensitize people about free sexual expression. Thus social, moral and cultural components find amalgamation in the intended sexual reform which embraces various alternative perspectives and also the possible backlash. So, gender and body in colonial India are discursive and dialogic regimes, always in an open-ended process through debates, dilemma and dialogue, construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of sexualities and resignification of scientific, sociological and philosophical scholarship.

The relationship of women’s material and symbolic presence to a variety of nationalist articulations focus on how a uniquely ‘colonial syncretic’ (Dixon, 1999) took shape around the body of the colonial women for mapping the new terrain. Social, cultural and political institutions came in constant collision as women themselves intervened in debates about nation and empire, tradition and modernity analyzing the ‘new scripts for the Indian colonial modern’ (Sinha, 1995) on an imperial stage for a transnational audience. They contributed actively and purposefully to the historic transference of the modernizing authority from the British colonial state to Indian nationalism, implying the inherent tension of adjoining these two separate spheres. At the same time it also articulates patriarchal phobia of ‘western’ modernization and resulting ‘moral laxity’ of women.

Health of the population becomes part of a much broader agenda of transformation for India’s modernizing nationalists. Also it is evident that sexuality and desire are intimately connected to social life and the propagation of self-control translates the ‘moral power of containment’ into various kinds of public and private realms, political dynamics and nationalistic goals harbouring self-criticism. The male body through the grind of western
education and loss of traditional sports and martial activities was supposedly marked, maimed and completely remade by colonialism (Sarkar, 2001). So, nationalist agenda of the postcolonial independent nation-state is preoccupied with an intense self-irony identifying the feeble physique as the visible site of surrender, loss and defeat under foreign discipline and hails the pre-colonial ideal of free oriental sexuality for regeneration of male and female body where men’s bodies are meant to be powerful and women’s bodies to be sexual. Instead of mere imitation of the west, new norms are introduced for disciplining sexuality and advocating sexual freedom, for balancing modern world and Indian tradition.

Thus, sexual frontier is writ large with confrontations about moral policing of individual and social body where nature, culture, gender, history and science are interlocked, reinterpreted, rewritten, restructured and played out. Ideas about nature and culture are not value free and discourses on ‘natural’ sexuality involve different standpoints with a dialogic approach to socio-cultural perception of what is ‘moral’. As the definition of ‘natural’ sex is not monolithic, this ‘myth’ of nature consists of a system of arbitrary signs which rely on the social consensus for meaning, and the feminine, masculine and trans-gender identities explore power relationships within the contemporary gender landscape. Thus, this Foucauldian power rhetoric further outlines the conflict and interaction between the coloniser and the colonised about the control of male, female and alternative sexualities, and in the opposition between British and Bengali gender systems, cultural, subcultural and subaltern identities form a dialogue between dominant Indian and western sexual values and morality. Nara-Naree identifies the sexual politics in the ideology of colonial modernity which involves the new role of men and women, and their reformed bodies record the inception of western discourses while maintaining dissociation from it with continuous contradiction between “western” and “Indian” sexuality, global and local, home and the world, imperial and national binaries. But denying western parameter in preference for Indian criteria is to be back again to essentialism. So, sexual culture reveals the complexity of transnational theories of body and its profound impact on colonial health registers the corporeal, materialistic, psychological and symbolic connotations.

To conclude, it can be asserted that culture is ‘imagined as an unruly body in need of constant surveillance and that gender (ed) discipline function as a constitutive part of Indian nationalist’s anticolonial visions of modernity’ (Burton, 1999, p. 10). With continuous confrontation between cultural expectation, sexual orientation, choice and identity, the concept of a biologically determined nature is rift. Gender becomes a problematic domain, an open-ended process for renegotiating nature and reconfiguration of culture which is inscribed on the colonial body through simultaneous construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. Intellectual and epistemological cross-currents of emerging post-colonial public body register the interplay between gender-nature-culture polemics and the hierarchy of domination and control created a conflict between tradition and modernity, new roles and social codes. Western sexuality is put into the discourse as a contrasting and constant frame of reference and east-west cultural encounters set up a conflict by suggesting the transnational reconciliation of differences, assimilation, acculturation and resistance. These multifarious vantage points offer no homogeneous unitary resolution rather imbibe selective western elements and revive ancient Indian sexuality, as the nationalist modernist reformation is explicitly interlinked with the regeneration and appropriation of aesthetic and scientific body. Sexuality is projected as a simultaneous domain of restriction, repression and danger as well as a site of exploration, pleasure and agency, investigating the contested terrain as a subject of moral, social, cultural, psychological, sociological, philosophical and political concern.

Gender identity is not a stable and fixed trait and contrahegemonic discourses establish a new system to provide ambiguous answers to the problem of incorporating corollary issues of east and west. So, gender and sexuality are not self-evident categories, but contingent and highly unstable systems of power to interrupt the equally precarious modernizing regimes in the permeability of national/colonial borders and historical and cultural forms. This interaction of colonial state and cultural agencies produce postcolonial modernity through the regulation of cultural differences which are read on to the bodies of men and women in the local, regional, national and transnational settings. So, the colonial syncretic is not a linear process with a single outcome but is understood as a set of interactive and interpretative practices which create multiple situational and relational qualities of interiority and exteriority where the colonized and the colonizer juxtapose problematic paradoxes.
Negotiating the new identity no longer remained as orient/occident, local/global binaries and the ‘ancient wisdom’ for a ‘New Age’ (Dixon, 1999) attempted to create a synthesis of east-west dialectics which would be simultaneously natural and scientific, traditional and modern with plurality of social actors and cultural forces involved in mapping the public body and the private space.

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