

The gift of the veil- education and the experience of double consciousness among women

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the experiences of women in the Indian education system, as teachers, students and mothers, to argue that women adjust to the male world by either wearing the veil of ignorance- by believing all that is propagated by the male eye or, by waging constant struggles between the truth as experienced through their own eyes and the feigned truth of the veil. The paper uses the concept of Double Consciousness as described by W.E.B DuBois, one of the 19th century Black Civil Rights activist, to show that women often tend to suppress their true feelings and use male standards to judge themselves. In doing so they remain stagnated behind the veil of ignorance which separates them from men and becomes the means of creating self-righteous hierarchies between men and women. The experience of double consciousness puts female teachers in stressful terrains as they seek to balance their contrasting roles of being the instruments of change and the moral keepers of tradition. Double Consciousness thus carries the potential for both- further oppression through compromises with the falsehood of the veil

and an emancipation through self-realization.

KEYWORDS: Double Consciousness, Women, Education, Culture, Gender

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is a problem faced by almost all societies across the world. A recent report by National Crime Records Bureau of the Indian Government shows a two-fold increase in crimes against women over the last ten years (NCRB, 2014). Such crimes and acts of physical violence form the basis of direct physical coercion, which is used extensively for maintaining gender hierarchies. However, violence against women traverses these physical limits and is often manifested through highly crafted and insidious ways. One of these is the denial of right to education to women by adhering staunchly to

traditionalist structures and obligations. Violence is thus “*camouflaged in moral terms*” (Krishnaraj, 2007). Morality and tradition are often evoked throughout a woman’s lifetime to enslave her to the rituals of the patriarchal house: denying proper education thus becomes one of the supreme ways to continue this violence. The Constitution of India gives them the right to avail education but the social system, with its disregard for women, treats them like secondary citizens. An atmosphere of threat and uncertainty often hangs over the attempt to educate girls, especially in non-urban areas, and yet the perpetrators of this climate of fear remain beyond the law.

In the following lines I will present complex, sometimes conflicting experiences and views of girls and female teachers with respect to school education in Barmer, Rajasthan. Adapting the concept of ‘Double consciousness’ as discussed by W.E.B DuBois, I will show how different women (teachers, students and mothers) experience and live through two states of consciousness- one which affirms the social milieu that surrounds and often overpowers them, and the other set of feelings and experiences through which their individual opinions are

formed. I will also examine the moral and social restrictions on female education, evident through the views expressed by other members of the community, which govern the necessity, utility and disregard for female education in the region.

THE VEIL AND DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

In ‘The souls of Black Folk’ DuBois writes:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the otherworld. (Du Bois, 1903; p. 2)

While referring to the Blacks in America, DuBois points that from the very beginning of her/his life, the American Black is taught to view herself/himself through the eyes of the White man. In other words, the White master becomes the mediator between the oppressed Blacks and their self-consciousness. But there is also an incipient inner sight of her/his

own, through which it is possible to make an appraisal of herself/himself independent of the white gaze, which DuBois calls the gift of the 'second sight'. DuBois' characterization of Blacks in the American society can be used to demonstrate the dismal state of women in various parts of India. Indian women, like the Blacks of America, have been virtual slaves of the Indian patriarchy. One just needs to replace the word 'Negro' with 'woman' to see the similarities between both. Just as the denial of self-consciousness guaranteed the oppression of the Blacks for centuries, similarly it slew any opportunities for Indian women to live through their own experience, on their own terms. Their eyes and senses eventually became accustomed to experience the world through the male gaze. The male gaze decided if she could take up education, if and whom she could marry, if and when she could give birth to the **expected** 'male' heir, if and how much she could inherit and countless **other** such matters, which eventually reified the subjugation of women, to an extent that oppression became normalized in their lives.

DuBois briefly defines Double Consciousness as the

'...sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.' (DuBois, 1903; p. 3)

There is thus one body but two souls, two conflicting experiences of the self with the world: **the redeemed slave as an object of pity versus the actuality of the Black American.** The **Indian** woman shares a similar fate- both a woman and the devout, traditional wife. Indian women are compelled to assess themselves and their daughters with the same 'contempt and pity' that they find stamped upon the male gaze. A gaze which isn't a part of their own lived realities determines the course of their lives. On one hand there is a feminine consciousness of the individual woman which is often suppressed, which threatens to form the basis of rebellion and which actively harbours **a certain self-understanding** and on the other hand there is a false consciousness, comprising

mostly of socially produced beliefs about oneself and one's presumed duties (that are internalized ferociously). In this paper, my task will be to show that the split in the consciousness is experienced in strange ways by women, especially in the context of education. They either remain oblivious to their true nature or they wage constant struggles between the truth of their eyes and the feigned truth of the veil. In both cases, there's a duality in consciousness: one, where the veil that separates the two consciousness becomes the truth of life and the other, where the contrasting truths of the veil and beyond the veil stress one's psyche.

I will also make an attempt to analyse the world behind the thick veil by focusing on sex-role ideologies and cultural beliefs that contextualize and formulate the issues and decisions related to female education. The educational system and especially female education in India is influenced greatly by hegemonic cultural beliefs and the political economy surrounding these beliefs and traditions. Ester Boserup is one of the foremost figures who observed that in many developing and underdeveloped nations, education for girls remains limited to learning household tasks from the mother whereas boys' education is strictly

about going to schools and learning specialized tasks (Boserup, 2007). In a paper titled "Male Hegemony, Social Class and Women's Education" Arnot argues that schools function to reproduce patterns of gender inequality through the concept of 'sex role ideology' which leads to a "vicious circle of attitudes in which learned attitudes of one generation constrain the new generation and so on" (Arnot, 1982; 68). This argument is also supported by the fact that only about 24.38% of girls in Rajasthan get enrolled in class IX and X (AISES, 2002).

Women's education is therefore highly dependent on factors such as cultural practices, family background and environment, surrounding value systems and gender ideologies. While observing the relationship between cultural traditions in various parts of India and lowered rates of female education, Narumi and Xiaodan state that "*societal tradition acts as an obstacle to the universalization of female education*" (Narumi & Xiaodan, 1996; 65).

Similarly, Colclough, Rose and Tembon have argued that under-enrolment of school age children is a function of poverty at national as well as household levels; however, the gendered variation in this under-enrolment are the consequence of dominant cultural practices and not

poverty per se. (Colclough *et al*, 2000) Another research study conducted by Borooach and Iyer shows the interlinkages between education, religion and caste structure in India. Their main findings suggest that the influence of these variables on education is negligible under favourable conditions (for example the literacy of parents) and significant under less favourable conditions (Borooach & Iyer, 2005). In a similar study about educational attainment, Chaudhuri and Roy found that graduation probabilities are often impacted by factors such as parents' educational standard, social and economic status of the family and other village norms (Chaudhuri and Roy, 2009). Thus, the research will also attempt to decipher how traditional practices, such as the norms about the roles and duties of women and men (that define the life behind the veil), influence women's education and experience of/with education.

BEHIND AND BEYOND THE VEIL: The teachers' Dilemma

The research brought out some interesting findings along the lines of theoretical perspectives derived from both DuBois and other feminist literature. There were instances when some female teachers displayed a sort of helplessness associated

with their standing upon a strange terrain: **they were instruments of change and the moral keepers of tradition at the same time.** This implied that they had to deal with two conflicting consciousness, one provoked them to try new things in private and the other tied to the old ways in public. Within the classroom, the teachers were supportive of education for girls, but outside they constantly judged their capacities through the patriarchal consciousness that was forced on them. These female teacher therefore represented the split being- like the split soul of the Black man- who either lives in complete ignorance of the possibilities he/she is endowed with or lives with a struggle between the commandments of the other (supposedly superior being) and the testimonies of the authentic self-experiences.

On an average most female teachers expressed the importance and necessity of education for girls. Interviewing male teachers within the school premises showed that their assessment of the problem (low levels of girls in the school) was a function of their upbringing and value structures. The difference between male and female teachers' standpoint was apparent. A careful eye into the matter

reveals that the need of education is felt more stringently by female teachers than male teachers as a result of various hardships that they face throughout their lives. Thus, the standpoint from where women respond is structurally different from men, because of their extremely different life experiences and this forms the basis of the difference in opinions.

The problem, as DuBois put it, is not merely about implementation of education. The real problem is 'being a woman' (or a Negro) in a world governed by patriarchal principles. It is owing to this problem that women become (similar to the Blacks) outcasts and strangers in their own house. Gradually the secondary status of 'being a woman' becomes the untested rule of the day: thus the necessity of a male child, or the gendered segregation of tasks and discrimination in education and thus the suppression of the feminine instincts.

Hereby, I will draw upon three distinct and often talked about themes that were alluded to by almost all interviewees. Although everybody used different instances/examples while making statements related to these themes yet the essence of their arguments was quite similar. They are:

1. The social construction of women and thus, of the entire issue of girls' education
2. The importance of women as 'individual entities' with some personal freedom
3. The role of education (appearing as a bridge between the first two)

Girls' education for most teachers is not about building their own abilities and creating means of emancipation but about being able to **raise a well-educated and well-mannered family**. Given these well-defined ends, it can be easily argued that the attitude of teachers' towards girls' education, howsoever positive, falls into the trap of patriarchy. Education is not valuable to them for learning's sake but for the sake of being equipped sufficiently to raise a modern family. The feminine consciousness therefore is denied any choice and rights in the matters of education. In other words, basic literacy for women is an essential dear to patriarchy for its utility in minor tasks of shopping, banking, tutoring children etc. which would otherwise create unnecessary burden for men. Similarly, teachers reiterated the efficacy of education in raising homely yet literate women, which

according to them results in the **steady social level development of the entire community**. According to many teachers the importance of education for women was only in its ability to initiate (and lead) positive changes in the environment of a family. Thus education merely served an instrumental purpose in trying to make girls into better educated mothers, efficient home makers and subservient care givers.

Just as the Atlanta compromise silenced the Blacks by focusing on industrial education for them and surrendering civil and political rights to the Whites in south, similarly the seed of rebellion in among these women is silenced by some lofty compromises that let them study, earn and raise a modern family. In such cases, the vision beyond the veil is as oppressive as the one which reigns behind the veil. In spite of the vision, these female teachers (like some Black leaders) tend to sympathize with the patriarchal system: functioning in its ambit and passing on similar understandings to the students (especially girls).

Apart from this, some female teachers repeatedly emphasized the importance of household work. Amongst them there were some who stated women lead relatively more comfortable lives than men. The

teachers could not be persuaded by any remarks that the writer made (in order to observe their responses) about the historical oppression of women. As per them “Men have to go out and earn, whereas women can enjoy the warmth and safety of a house. Thus, a woman should know how to cook, wash, farm etc. so that she can look after the man who toils hard” (interview transcript). One can note the ostensible patriarchal sentiments involved in such statements against one’s own gender. “*The biological fact of sex differences is interpreted in many different ways by different groups; biology is always mediated by society*” (Hartmann 1987). The fact that there are biological differences between girls and boys is interpreted and applied to use in differing mechanisms. In the given scenario, education for girls is held distinct from that for boys because of ossified roles and status for both within the society. Girls can ignore education however, boys, who’ll lead their households in future cannot afford to lose out on proper education (which allows them to earn a decent living and maintain some social status). The endorsement of such views is thus directly linked to the amount of advantage that they yield to men. Education for men is akin to livelihood for the family whereas

education for women signifies two things- firstly, her ability to contribute efficiently in the management of the household activities and secondly, her ability to please her family through the skills (of cooking, cleaning, sewing etc.) that she learns as a girl. Again, in the words of Heidi Hartmann-

“Household members continue to make decisions about pooling incomes, caring for dependent members, engaging in wage work, and having children but it is important to remember that within the household as well as outside it men have more power.” (Hartmann, 1987; 116)

In a household, all major decisions related to family planning, sharing incomes, working for wages etc. are outwardly taken together by all members but often it is men who exert their power, both inside and outside the household to make these decisions. Education, due its very nature of being an inherent part of both personal and public spheres, is also entangled in these power relations. Thus, when teachers talk of importance of family, society and social norms, demand for educated brides, safety concerns for girls, and value of household work (irrespective of the girl's ambitions), they are expressing the concerns of an ingrained patriarchal structure. Whether

these issues are nicely crafted ways of strengthening the power of patriarchy (given the fact that the contemporary world is abound with discourse of rational and free individual) is in itself a question to ponder seriously.

With respect to the subject of marriage many female teachers confessed that marrying off their daughters (at the right age- nothing above 23) is one of their biggest priorities. Even as these teachers study further or express their ambitions of acquiring better professional positions in the educational system, they continually hold on to the rigid social values that make and unmake them. Career, ambition, knowledge etc. become group strivings: freeing the aspirations of women from their individual personalities and weaving them along the demands of the other consciousness, the patriarchal gaze. The resultant being their conscious and oftentimes unconscious suppression of the truth or the meaning that they perceive/gauge through their own feminine experiences. The vision beyond the veil gets preoccupied in gaining sympathy and cooperation from the males who run the system. This also shows that a mere insight into one's self is not sufficient to castoff the veil of incessant repudiation.

The question then arises of (how to) creating sufficient spaces (public and private) in such a way that women can learn to trust the truth of what they see and feel, rather than manipulating their lives for the sheer pleasure of the other's gaze.

There were also a few teachers who spoke of the importance of freedom and self-respect for women; and of education for the sake of personal freedom of women. These teachers have a somewhat different story to tell. They state that educated girls are generally more understanding and often display the courage to speak up against injustice or other unfair decisions. They emphasized the need for personal development of girls, making sure that girls learn to live on their own without a debilitating psychological and physical dependence on men and their families. During the interviews these teachers also shared their own experiences, the struggles and hardships. Although they have attuned themselves to the dominant cultural norms but sometimes their life experiences and their own ambitions push them into a problematic state. They agree that there is a stark difference between how they act in their own small spaces and how they compromise with the larger dominant view. For example, their

behaviour differed significantly in different physical spaces- of school (if they lived within the school premises), of their family (household), and of the community (market, public spaces and other social gatherings). They found themselves torn between these two opposites that (they felt) had to be constantly balanced.

Amidst this, there were also a few statements that referred to the prominent role played by education in girls' lives. Teachers felt that one's future (especially women) in the modern world depended to a great extent on the kind of education one receives. Education, according to them not only leads to awareness among girls but also prepares a strong foundation for helping them begin their individual journey towards new visions and ideas. They went on to state that traditions are transformed and fresh perspectives are embraced only when people are educated properly about the ethical and utilitarian dimensions that together define them.

In Dubois' words:

“But when to earth and brute is added an environment of men and ideas, then the attitude of the imprisoned group may take three main forms,—a feeling of revolt and revenge; an attempt to adjust all thought

and action to the will of the greater group; or, finally, a determined effort at self-realization and self-development despite environing opinion.” (DuBois, 1903; 21).

For Dubois, the earth and the brute represent the Black man, who when approached with education or other ideas of his/her emancipation reacts in three major ways- he/she becomes revengeful (as seen in the revolts against slavery) towards the other oppressive class; he/she attempts to assimilate and adjust with the will of the more powerful group; or finally he/she begins a journey towards self-realization despite the claims of the people surrounding her/him. A similar pattern of responses is observed among these female teachers: either they submit their will and their being to the fancy of the male world or they make a subtle yet unwavering attempt at self-development and self-assertion without much ado. The latter promises a better future and a wholesome self-understanding to them and their students; the former transforms the vision beyond the veil into an equally oppressive and manipulative scheme. It is this **potential of emancipation or tyranny and oppression that is contained within this double consciousness**-the vision beyond the veil, or the conflict that is

laden on the being of a female teacher. By ascribing to forms of knowledge produced by the male gaze and by endorsing the male construction of culture (and society), female teachers surrender their agency, rights and self-respect to the other patriarchal society. However, the other small group of female teachers who clearly demand freedom for women while emphasizing their individuality, address the problems behind the veil- ‘of order and subordination’. Through their determined efforts it becomes clear that there are moments of intimacy with the gifted feminine consciousness through which they experience differently.

MY DAUGHTER MUST WEAR THE VEIL

In urban areas most girls were going to school and some parents welcomed the idea of sending their daughters to universities. However, parents in both urban and rural areas were very keen on two themes- marriage and housework. Parents in rural areas did not display much concern towards educating their daughters. The idea of educating them was acceptable to them only if the schools were located within the vicinity of the village or at the most within a kilometre from their homes. Household chores such as cooking,

cleaning, looking after young siblings and help in other farm related activities was prioritized over school education. Some of the educated villagers (who formed the elite class of the village) did not put such restrictions of distance and allowed their daughters to study till they were wed.

Of the several mothers interviewed, there was only one who believed housework was not central to a girl's upbringing. Another important aspect of parents' attitude was their belief that boys' education is really valuable as they need to earn in future and are of immense support (sometimes the only support) in their old age, unlike girls who are *paraya dhan* (assets belonging to others), as they get married and live with a new family. Such beliefs shared by both mothers and fathers are results of an age long exposure to specific cultural dogmas and forms of tradition that have never been challenged, that they easily relate to and through/in which they live (standpoints). They feel that girls must be experts at housework 'because they will have children of their own one day and then no amount of education will help them if they do not know the valuable skills of cooking and cleaning' (interview transcripts). It is perhaps owing to this reason that many

(parents in rural areas) do not send their daughters to school or send them only when the school is located close by. Since the marriage of their daughters is their utmost concern, they always want to make sure that the daughter remains perfectly 'eligible' for a suitable boy and family. This notion of eligibility includes various fears, the biggest being the fear from unwanted sexual harassment and hence the inexplicable anxiety regarding girls' safety. A careful analysis reveals various other fears that remain tactfully hidden behind this one fear: that the daughter might elope with a person of her choice, that she might become free spirited, that she might go 'out of parents' control' and they might lose all authority on her. Thus a vicious circle is formed- daughters are denied schooling, their honour is protected, the traditional outlook is transferred to her and eventually she also becomes sceptical about providing school based education to her daughter! In all this the very question of girls' personal freedom never arises. It is conveniently assumed that she has no aspirations. It is not that the parents do not understand the importance of being literate. Throughout the interviews they stated many times that education improves one's life (*bhavishya*) and boosts self-esteem. Yet, the pressure

of a fully formed male consciousness and the oppressive patriarchal structure forces them to ignore the very question of schooling/education of their daughters. It is in these ways that sex-role ideologies are reproduced within families and communities, and certain traditional ideals become hurdles in universalizing education for girls.

Since the family is much more than a closed system of few people- a complete social entity that often serves as a ground for various dynamic changes in tradition, the denial of right to education to girls is another way in which interests of men and the established patriarchy are preserved. In such environments, it wouldn't be a wonder to find women who are continuing to be as oppressive as their elders or to find women who are torn between tradition and personal ambition and finally surrender to the austerities of tradition.

Most parents- fathers and mothers are wrapped up in thick coatings of patriarchy. They neither have an insight about the nature of their trepidations, nor do they have the seedlings of any thought for emancipation of their daughters. They live, day in and day out, with the veil- unyielding to their own selves and engaging in an unconscious oppression on

the young girls (or the womenfolk of the household). Behind the veil an educated daughter can appear dangerous- for she has the consciousness to demand what is rightfully hers and discard which is unjustly thrust upon her. Behind the veil, without the experience of double consciousness the daughter is free to serve her family, to work in the field, to develop confused feelings about the school and to marry as and when the parents command her.

WHY IS MY SCHOOL SO DIFFERENT FROM MY HOUSE?

The following lines will discuss the experiences of girls who attend school regularly by focusing on two interlinked topics: girls' views on their own schooling/education and their understanding of their parents' views on their schooling and education. Only when they have a certain understanding about the former will they be able to analyse the latter. Throughout the study, there was a considerable variation in terms of the both. There were girls who were very hardworking and passionate about studies, but didn't have requisite support from their parents. On the other hand there

were girls who were not at all interested in 'studies' but had extraordinary support from their parents (which was often a highly frustrating factor for their parents). In the former case, girls usually wanted to have a teaching career or work in the police force 'to punish the criminals who harass women' (interview transcripts). In the latter case, girls either wanted to get married or wanted to work as beauticians (according to them that required skill and not much education). In both cases, the girls were highly aware of the rampant gender discrimination in their communities- afraid that they might not be able to study after class VIII.

Some girls spoke in length about the 'fun involved in learning new things and concepts through books' (interview transcript). They were also mindful of the status that good education and merit granted them inside the school. They showed incredible interest in activities related to the school. Their life at school however, according to them, was a complete opposite of the ideals that they were supposed to inherit and internalize at home. For instance, when they enquired about further studies or when they have to leave early to help the mothers in the field, they become somewhat forlorn and hint

towards the inevitability of certain things in their lives.

Their ambitions are portrayed not only as what they would want to be (teachers mostly) but also what they wanted their siblings to be (learn and have a happy life through education). Most of them (barring one who doesn't want to attend school after finishing class VIII) wanted to improve society in some or the other way (ranging from getting rid of child marriage to ending discrimination between girls and boys). The others were more focused towards improvement of their own families.

It was also observed that school environments had an impact upon girls' experience of conflict between their family and school lives. If the school had an active and involved (highly inspiring and encouraging) head teacher (along with other teachers), the girls would be equally enthusiastic and vibrant, unyielding to the traditional beliefs about marriage and more inquisitive about the researcher. Such teachers created appropriate atmosphere for them to look beyond the veil. For the young girls it meant being insistent on higher studies, not marrying until they felt prepared, and not making crude adjustments between housework and

studies. It is through the insight and leadership of their teachers that they were learning and would learn to make valuable judgements through the double consciousness that they experience as a result of their contrasting lives at school and homes. Since their identities are created by both- the traditional oppression that they face at homes and the promise of emancipation which is made by education, the teachers should guide them in their self-development so that they can transform their right to vote, civic equality and other tokens of patriarchal governance (both external and internal) into lamps which can dispel the darkness, the ignorance of the self, that is set by the veil.

That which awaits

In spite of these daily conflicts and confrontations within oneself, there remains a consciousness that seeps through the rough coverings of patriarchy. This self-consciousness of the woman contains not only the momentary self-realizations that female teachers and students have but also the path towards true emancipation. In DuBois' words:

“..the black man's turning hither and thither in hesitant and doubtful striving has often made his very strength to lose

effectiveness, to seem like absence of power, like weakness.” (DuBois, 1903)

The promise of emancipation made the Black man seek it everywhere and the doubt involved in this false seeking made him believe that he was weak and ineffective. These women, with the image of their promised land similarly feel weak and helpless before the male gaze. They doubt their strivings and through this doubt they accept the male consciousness as the truth!

But DuBois warns,

“And yet it is not weakness,—it is the contradiction of double aims. The double-aimed struggle of the black artisan—on the one hand to escape white contempt for a nation of mere hewers of wood and drawers of water, and on the other hand to plough and nail and dig for a poverty-stricken horde—could only result in making him a poor craftsman, for he had but half a heart in either cause.” (DuBois, 1903)

Doubting one-self in this way is not weakness- it is but the result of contradictions between the two aims. On one hand the black man wants to free himself from the contempt and pity of the white and on the other hand he wishes to

carve a life for himself within the White norms. The two opposing aims give rise to self-doubt and weakness of aim in him. Female teachers also experience this weakness which is but a contradiction of double aims and this weakness, they transfer to their students. Since they want both- to be accepted as equals to men and to engage in society in the same way as men, they often get only the sense of powerlessness before the deep-rooted patriarchy. This double consciousness must not yield in well-paying teaching jobs, or a well set-up house but seek a dignified self of one's own, which alone can break the shackles of the male gaze, the veil of ignorance and self-denial.

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