

The Exigency of Cultural Transformation through the Eyes of Deepa Narayan

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Gender differences are a phenomenon around the world actively researched by social scientists. Culture influences thinking, language and human behavior. The social environment, in which individuals are born and live, shapes their attitudinal, emotional and behavioral reactions and the perceptions about what is happening around. The same applies in the case of assigned/assumed roles in society based on gender. Cultural dimensions that reflect differences in gender roles, but also elements related to the ethics of sexual difference were highlighted by many researchers. The presentation of these issues from the perspective of the social scientist and author Deepa Narayan is the subject of this article. Briefly, the article refers to the discussions about whether and how norms can be reset. *Chup: Breaking the Silence about Indian Women* should be the springboard for Indian women to retrospect and break the silence around gender inequality.

One sheds one's sickness in books - repeats and presents again one's emotions, to be master of them (D.H. Lawrence)

Culture can be defined as the systems of knowledge shared by a relatively large group of people. Gender aspects are relevant both in relation to the broad definition of culture as a 'social construction' and to the way in which cultural policy is designed and implemented. Cultures vary in their definition of gender roles and show varying degrees of tolerance for atypical gender behaviors and gender change. An understanding of cultural context is important in the assessment of a typical gender development and challenges current models of sex and gender. Deepa Narayan observes that as she spoke to urban Indian women in many different settings, in India and abroad, a disturbing pattern emerged. To put it in her own words from an interview, "yet another smartly dressed woman, an artist, a business manager, a financial analyst, a professor, a dentist, an engineer, a lawyer, a researcher, a scientist, a teacher, an educated stay-at-home mom, was so unsure of herself. Or that she sounded, after the obligatory gender equality claims and sometimes

passionate lecture, like her mother would have sounded thirty or forty years ago.” The author made modifications to her research methodology and ended up with 8000 pages of notes from interviews with highly educated women in the cities, and discovered that there was still a huge gap between intellectual beliefs and actual behavior.

From this the author builds her central arguments that gender equality is not born from the intellect, but from ingrained culture; and that this culture, which currently favors inequality, and explains both sexual violence and everyday sexism, can be changed; and that this change is not possible without the active participation of men, and so the focus should not be on blaming “patriarchy” but on finding ways to educate men and to include them in finding solutions.

Our culture, according to the author, trains women to not exist either by literally killing them (foeticides, female infanticides, violence) or by training them to “disappear” via seven habits, making feminists with bad habits:

Drawing on the details of the lives of women and men I interviewed, each over several hours, I found that girls are trained in seven cultural habits of non-existence. These are deny the body; be quiet; please others; deny your sexuality; isolate yourself; have no individual identity; and be dependent. It is deep training in these habits that makes so many women feminists in belief but not in behavior. Feminists with bad habits. (9)

Chup: Breaking the Silence about India’s Women solidifies and lays out specific changes for cultural modification in a structured manner. The author throughout discusses, using actual quotes, examples, and anecdotes from the lives of the women she interviewed, how the habits she mentioned are developed in women, its consequences and finally offers reflections and suggestions for how these habits can be broken. *Chup*, is based on 600 detailed interviews with women and some men across India’s metros, wherein she identifies seven key habits that may dominate women’s everyday lives, despite their education, success, financial status and family background.

Excerpts from an interview reveals that it was after the Nirbhaya rape that she asked herself what she could contribute and eventually it became clear that she needed to explore culture. Indeed the incident shook the collective conscience of the nation. She added that the public debate was focused on law and the police and everyone would say it was also

because of our culture, and the conversation would stop at that. She said that Culture was a big word that was difficult to grab. So she decided to explore culture by asking what it meant to be a good woman or good man. She started looking at the culture that allows men to think and do whatever they pleased with a woman to her body, mind, thought or psyche. Even when the laws were made more stringent in India, it did nothing to deter crimes against women. It made her want to dig into culture to get a grasp of men's thinking process. She couldn't believe the answers of highly educated students from India's best colleges. Her motivation of writing the book is to break the silence about the lives of women in modern middle and upper class India and about what is happening in our families:

In my book I take apart women's everyday behaviors that do not always make women look good. My reason is simple. Unless we cannot change despite our intellectual beliefs our world will not change.

This book is about us. It is about women in the middle and upper classes. We need to talk about ourselves and not just 'them', those poor, uneducated and unfortunate women out there. We need to break our silence about our own lives. But silence too has cultural meaning. (10-11)

The running theme across the narratives of the women in the book is the feeling of being singled out which leads to women bottling up everything in silence. Many women shared stories of their battling shame, embarrassment, frustration, humiliation and confusion.

Is Silence a virtue or is silence betrayal? I was taught that silence is a virtue. Silence is polite. Silence is good. Silence is spiritual. But there comes a time in one's life and in the life of a society when silence becomes betrayal. A betrayal of goodness. A betrayal of decency. It is time to end this silent betrayal now. (11)

The book aims at a target audience. It is not specifically for women. It is for men who care for and respect the women in their lives. A man's perspective might change for his woman in his life as he goes through the narratives, the real life incidents and expressions of which the author shares in *Chup*. The women's rights movement in India needs a revolution, and there can be no successful women's revolution without a men's

revolution. *Chup: Breaking the Silence about India's Women* explores the ways in which Indian society reinforces the negative views women harbour about themselves.

Women are taught not to exist by stifling their voice and identity. It is a metaphorical non-existence that limits them to roles and responsibilities (daughter, sister, mother, and wife) and murders their individuality. *Chup* is a voice that battles this push towards non-existence. An unequal culture between men and women survives on hundreds of ordinary, everyday behaviors, proverbs and punishments. We are all involved. It is time for us to change. A five-year research project, the book *Chup* establishes that educated women and men must come together to change seven everyday habits that perpetuate gender inequality. It develops a framework of seven 'cultural habits of non-existence' that women are trained to adhere to but ignores the role of patriarchy.

Deepa Narayan presents us with seven "cultural habits of non-existence" that all Indian women are trained to adhere to as they grow from girlhood to womanhood. None of them should really jolt us since they are so normalized in our everyday cultural landscape. But when viewed collectively, they hold up a mirror to our deeply troubled society.

Deny the body: Women are told not to talk about their bodies and the worst consequence of this is the silence and shame built around sexual violence and abuse. They are taught to diminish their bodies by disguising it in every possible way including hanging their heads and hunching their bodies. According to Narayan, women learn to distance themselves from their bodies by being discouraged from movement and sporty activity.

Be quiet: Girls are constantly reprimanded to speak softly and less, be "sober", shun loudness, only listen, not be opinionated or argumentative. The result is persistent self-doubt and low confidence that Narayan says silences women from voicing their opinions and asking for their due in the workplace.

Please others: Girls are regularly badgered into pleasing and adjusting to the needs of others, feeling guilty about saying no, and disguising their own hurts or feelings: smiling but not over-smiling; definitely not laughing loudly. This takes a toll on their mental and emotional health and on their ability to make decisions, initiate action and to take on leadership positions.

Deny your sexuality: Narayan lays out story after story where women talk about how at puberty and after, all aspects of their sexuality including their developing breasts, hips,

body hair, menstruation and sexual desire are buried in denial and shame. The consequence of this is not that women don't indulge in sexual exploration – on the contrary, casual sex is on the rise across the country – but that due to lack of training in healthy sexuality (based on consent, equality, respect and trust), women are left vulnerable to sexual violations and abuse within homes, in offices and public spaces.

Have no individual identity: Many women interviewed in the book express anger at society viewing them only as mothers, daughters and wives but buy into that rhetoric themselves, speaking incessantly in the language of duty and sacrifice to describe their role as women.

Be dependent: According to Narayan, women's systematic training in physical, material and psychological dependence on men and fear of being alone makes women unable to trust themselves.

Isolate yourself: Narayan argues that since we carefully groom our girls in fear, insecurity, and distrust, women don't build enough communities of caring female groups. Instead women doubt each other and backbite.

The author explores women's learned habits, pleasing behaviours and deference to men, which feed a vicious cycle of silence. She encourages women to make themselves heard, even in the face of a society that constantly yells 'Chup!' It is suggested how this culture can be transformed. The narrative aims at not a list of 'do's' and 'don'ts' but are general guidelines for action. The author's metaphor of gender bias as "dirt" which must be cleaned every day pricks the minds of every Indian woman and man. She makes interesting observations in the latter chapters about co-opting men as integral to the fight against the cultural systems, about facilitating collective action and ensuring solidarity, and the importance of redefining "power," before concluding on a hopeful note by asserting that change is possible and offers her suggestions for how this culture can be transformed. It is the need of the hour for proper gender sensitization which aims at specific changes for cultural modification in a structured manner.

Works Cited

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