

Exploring Vivekananda's Denial of Widow Remarriage Through a Modified Orientalist and *Advaitic* Framework

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“Do you think that a nation is saved by the number of husbands its widows get”? [1]

Vivekananda, the hallowed face of modern Hinduism and neo-Vedanta, has been critiqued by an army of scholars— often feminist and subaltern critics including Amiya Sen— for being a hapless conservative along the ranks of Aristotle when it comes to women. Along with his exotic version of ideal womanhood (which I'll discuss later in this article), his stance on widow remarriage [Vivekananda rejects the prospect of widow remarriage] has always been a subject of intense scholarly debates, which has been interpreted and reinterpreted by scholars like Sen (2003), Rüstau (1998), Raghuramaraju (2007), Sharma (2011), Dalton (1982), etc, along various lines. While the coterie represented in this article by Sen understands it in the framework of 'conservative euphoria', the group represented by Raghuramaraju uses an Orientalist framework to understand Vivekananda's prima facie conservative convictions [2]. Though I'm not denying the undisguised stint of conservatism plaguing his ideas, I would prefer to look at his ideas from two other perspectives (in addition to Amiya Sen's conservative euphoria interpretation) – modified Orientalism (exoticism) and advaita.

A. Raghuramaraju interprets Vivekananda as an Orientalist thinker [3]. However, since Orientalism brings with it the ignominy of Material-Spiritual rhetoric (the East as spiritually advanced and the West as materially developed) that Vivekananda modifies into an erotic-exotic dichotomy, I would prefer to consider his philosophic disposition as a reshaped/ modified form of Orientalism [4]. Moreover, in the context of the missionary campaign that reclined Hinduism- which Vivekananda understood as nativism- into a malodorous state of shame, he negates this civilisation vs savagery/ superstition narrative by attaching a premium to the Eastern value systems, raising it to a higher pedestal, which is quintessential to defend his position of what Yuri Bezmenov would say- “no thanks, we have our junk” - or we have our value systems which, as Raghuramraju interpreted, “reins supreme” in the “hierarchy” where “Western materialism figures at the bottom” [5] [6] . Such a stance requires a rather fierce defence of what the West branded as savagery (Indian value systems) - and it would explain Vivekananda’s position on widow remarriage.

By attaching a premium to the Indian value systems, Vivekananda would’ve said something like- the practices which are ordained by your text come naturally to us. And since what is natural is good (and the best) - the classical Aristotelian or Rousseauvian rhetoric- it beautifully aligns with the greater framework of Vivekananda’s modified Orientalism (which I’d also call exoticism). And when I apply the same logic to his stance on widow remarriage, it turns out to be something like- in contrast to the text-based order of nuns you (the West) have, we (the East) have a natural order of nuns (the widows).

Therefore, for Vivekananda, widows constitute a natural order of nuns- something not ordained by a text but the very ancient natural practice of the place of being/ dwelling- which is to be read along with the 'natural is good' narrative and the "hierarchy" that A Raghuramraju talked about. By attaching a natural premium to the Eastern practices, Vivekananda, therefore, justifies his hierarchy of placing Eastern value systems at the apex, and it would also explain his "limited fascination for Western materialism", or his denial of the substance of modernity (which Gandhi embraces), to be more precise [7].

Interestingly, pre-Marx socialist thought emanated from the Bible. The lofty socialist ideals of Saint Simon, Cabet and Blanc- all devout Christians- had their socialist-leaning inspired by the Bible. For instance, the socialist motto of "to each according to needs ... and from each according to ability" comes from the Book of Acts that documented early Christian practices [8]. And if I go with Sen's interpretation, Vivekananda would've said something like- the socialism emanating from your text comes naturally to us- as Sen interprets Vivekananda's stance of dismissing the prospect of widow remarriage as the silhouetting example of ingrained "socialism in Hindu [Eastern] society" [9]. Nevertheless, I'd like to use the term 'social equity' here instead of 'socialism', which is a bit misleading, as Vivekananda rejected the substance of modernity, and socialism is a "distinctly modern theory" (alongside liberalism), whose roots can be traced back to the age of Enlightenment [10]. However, in addition to the overbearing Orientalist framework, this position has to be read along with Vivekananda's conservative conviction.

For him, marriage was not an individual privilege to be exercised at will, but a sacred duty every woman must perform. Nonetheless, due to the lopsided sex ratio characterised by the general “scarcity of men” in the higher classes of Hindu society, the remarriage of each widow transmutes as the loss of opportunity for virgins to fulfil their sacred duty [11]. And since “they have had their chance”, widows shall not remarry- so the principles of ‘social equity’ say- which alludes to the natural (and not text-based) commitment of the Hindu society to ‘equity’ (not equality, for the reason I mentioned elsewhere), and Amiya Sen interprets it as an instance showcasing “socialism [social equity] in Hindu societies” [12].

Furthermore, I propose to employ the aforementioned erotic-exotic dichotomy to explain Vivekananda’s dismissal of the idea of widow remarriage. I would like to quote Vivekananda here- “women in the West do not appear to be women at all” [13] – which can be interpreted in the erotic-exotic framework of attaching an exotic value to the Indian womenfolk possessing what Wollstonecraft called “sexual virtues” [14] – that of wifely chastity, integrity, devotion, sentiments, and motherly love- which can be juxtaposed by Vivekananda’s earlier erotic stance of comparing Indian women with “black owls” vis-à-vis American women [15]. By attaching a premium to exotic womanhood, Vivekananda reinforces the spiritual superiority of the East and thus justifies the “hierarchy”. For him, Indian wives possess the virtue of satitwa- the wifely chastity and sexual virtues of Sita and Savitri (he cites the example of Rajput queen Padmini’s self-sacrifice emanating from her wifely chastity).

He, further, compares the love of the wife towards her husband to the selfless love of the gopis for Krishna, as illustrated in the Bhagavat Purana.

However, this stance shall also be interpreted in the light of advaita. Though Vivekananda appears to be joining forces with Bankim Chandra Chatterjee who suggested that a chaste and devout widow could hardly remarry, the former grounds his assertions on a firm philosophical fabric of advaita. For Vivekananda, the love and faithfulness of the widows were the bastions of Indian civilisation- as he sees a euphoric stint of permanence in the widow's love for her deceased husband, and since the immutable God or the bhraman is the only permanent entity in the advaita paradigm, the logical conclusion is the covert divinity in the love and unwavering devotion of the widows- which is the universal soul or the bhraman itself. Moreover, an unmarried widow, steadfast to her wifely chastity and unfettered love for her beloved, is symbolic of an ecstatic order in the cosmic chaos- a "semblance of permanence in an ever-changing world" [16] - something angelic, seraphic, and celestial, a divine rupture in what Baudelaire calls the "fleeting, contingent, and ephemeral" [17]. In toto, Vivekananda was critical of widow remarriage. However, an interpretation of Vivekananda's dismissal of the prospect of widow remarriage solely on the lines of his conservative viewpoint desperately fails to present the entire picture. In this essay,

I tried to read his conservative standpoint along with the modified Orientalist framework of the erotic-exotic dichotomy and the advaita philosophy to appreciate Vivekananda's philosophical disposition and the unbridled consistency running through the essence of his thought like a beatific string of pearls.

Endnotes

[1] Vivekananda (1894, January 24), Friends (letters to his disciples in Madras), para 7, line 4, in the Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (5.1.7).

[2] Sen, A. (2003), 'Swami Vivekananda on History and Society', in Swami Vivekananda, Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 65.

[3] Raghuramaraju, A. (2007), 'Swami and Mahatma Paradigms: State and Civil Society', in Debates in Indian Philosophy: Classical, Colonial, and Contemporary, Oxford University Press, pp. 40.

[4] Vivekananda suggests that the West was also philosophically advanced in the past (Greek philosophy) and the East was also materially advanced in the past (zero, geometry, algebra, astronomy, etc., in ancient India) to counter the material-spiritual stereotype of Orientalist thinkers, and modifies it into an erotic-exotic dichotomy. Exoticism was associated with the East. For instance, though the East had blueprints and the concept of making airplanes (Vimana purana), we don't have enough physical evidence to prove that material manifestations of such ideas existed. And the West was associated with eroticism- a desire to make something consumable, attach material value or give material manifestations to ideas, i.e., some sort of a Faustian bargain (consider pornography, for example, which makes beauty a thing to consume).

- [5] Sengupta, A, (2020), Understanding the Political Scenario of INDIA, CANADA, JAPAN, CHINA, USA, FRANCE, etc., [Video],. In YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9TviluXPSE>
- [6] Raghuramaraju (2007), pp. 46.
- [7] Raghuramaraju (2007), pp. 32.
- [8] Bovens, L, (2020, September 4), "From Each According to Ability; to Each According to Need" – Tracing the Biblical Roots of Socialism’s Enduring Slogan. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/from-each-according-to-ability-to-each-according-to-need-tracing-the-biblical-roots-of-socialisms-enduring-slogan-138365>
- [9] Sen (2003), pp. 71.
- [10] Smaldone, W, (2019), European Socialism: A Concise History with Documents, p. 3-4.
- [11] Vivekananda (1895, February 27), India’s Gift to the World (speech), Brooklyn Ethical Association, in the Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (2.7.16).
- [12] Sen (2003), pp. 71.
- [13] Vivekananda quoted by Sen (2003), pp. 69.
- [14] Jones, C, (2002), Mary Wollstonecraft’s Vindications and Their Political Tradition, in The Cambridge Companion to Mary
- [15] Wollstonecraft, pp. 48.
- [16] Vivekananda quoted by Sen (2003), pp. 69.
- [17] Sen (2003), pp. 71.
- [18] Baudelaire, C, (1964), The Painter of Modern Life, trans. Jonathan Mayne, pp. 13.

[19] Vivekananda quoted by Sen (2003), pp. 69.

Sen (2003), pp. 71.

[20] Baudelaire, C. (1964), *The Painter of Modern Life*, trans. Jonathan Mayne, pp. 13.

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