



"I'm Not Like Indian Women." Reflections of Young European Women in Varanasi, India

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Introduction

India is not a place you simply and clinically ‘see’; it’s a total experience, an assault on the senses, a place you’ll never forget.” This is how the editors of the most popular travel guidebook to India, Lonely Planet, end their introduction (Lonely Planet India 1997, 16). This phrase represents well the image many travellers have of India when they go there for the first time. Moreover, there is a common travellers’ discourse that sees India as a difficult and dangerous place to a vulnerable traveller (Bhattacharyya 1997, 378), particularly to women. The Lonely Planet also gives a strong message that women should behave in certain ways in order to discourage sexual overtures whereas men travellers are not given any such standards of behavior (ibid., 376). In this article, I look at the ways in which young European women staying in the city of Varanasi (also called Banaras) for long periods of time talk about India and how they negotiate their place and role as women there. A vast amount of travel literature was written by women travellers in the colonial era, and the encounters of colonial women with “otherness” have been widely analysed (see e.g. Mills 1991; Pratt 1992; Grewal 1996; Lewis 1996; Ghose 1998). This article brings this discussion to the post colonial era and endeavors to initiate a discussion about how to understand the encounters between visiting Western women and the locals in India today.

By mirroring themselves to the Indian “other,” the young European women in Varanasi claim to have found their “real Western selves.” In their talk, they constantly construct differences between themselves and the local people, and this differentiation is gendered. These European women define their own “advanced” position in opposition to the image of “backward” Indian women, in very similar terms to what Mohanty has argued in her article about the discourse of “the third world woman” (Mohanty 1991). India seems to be a tool for the self understanding and empowerment of the young European women in Varanasi. Moreover, the attitudes of these women and those found in colonial travel literature from the nineteenth and early twentieth century seem to be very similar. The significance of gender in travel literature has been studied also by Hapuli whose research on texts written by Finnish women travelers between the World Wars (Hapuli 2003 & 2005) offers an interesting

comparison to my material although none of the women she writes about went to India.

Lewis has written a book about women's representations of the oriental other in nineteenth century art (Lewis 1996). She argues that women were not innocent in the colonial project, although they did not have access to official power positions that were reserved for Western men (*ibid.*, 13–18). Women met the "other" from a specially gendered perspective but still not as equals (*ibid.*, 183–184; Mills 1991, 63). My article shows that their role as women is crucial when young European women in Varanasi encounter the "Indian other" today.

Encounters with "otherness" have been studied also in Finnish context (see e.g. Lehtonen et al. 2003 & 2004; Kaartinen 2004; Löytty 2005; Rastas et al. 2005). The context of my research is, however, very different. In fact, when reading this article, it is important to keep in mind that Varanasi is a very particular place. As a holy city of Hinduism, it has become a symbol of traditional Hindu India and a sign of Eastern otherness (Eck 1983, 9). The status of women is a lot more traditional in Varanasi than in many other India cities: women still wear almost only saris, and the public sphere is clearly dominated by men.

Hutnyk has done research on young backpackers doing charity work in Calcutta. He argues that the phenomenon is a manifestation of global inequality. "Alternative travel" to places like India is a privilege of Western middle class youth as only they have the time and money to search for themselves in "the Third World" (Hutnyk 1996, ix–x). Hutnyk has studied the ways backpackers in Calcutta "make sense and explain their experiences" and how they view the city, the decay of which has become a tourist attraction (*ibid.*, 5). The starting point for my research is the same as that of Hutnyk: due to the present world order, Varanasi is a cheap place for young middle class Westerners and its spiritual character offers a good base for searching for oneself. Moreover, also I look at the ways in which travellers view India and explain their experiences. Yet, my research is gender specific: I look at women's gendered ways of dealing with India, which is a step further from Hutnyk's study where gender was not explicitly taken into account. A Finnish researcher, Hottola, has studied tourist women's experiences of sexual harassment in India. He argues that such incidents are a result of cultural confusion: the harassing men hold an image of amoral Western woman and act accordingly (Hottola 1999). Sexual harassment is an important theme in my interviews as well but this article deals also with several other aspects of my interviewees' experiences and encounters in India.

The Group of Young Westerners in Varanasi

Many young Westerners take a year out abroad after secondary school as a kind of growing up ritual. Due to its exoticism and cheapness, India has been a popular destination for young travellers since the sixties, and it still attracts thousands of backpackers every year. Some of these people are not just short term tourists but end up visiting India frequently for long periods of time. Particularly Varanasi attracts Westerners and this article is based on material collected there. Varanasi is located in

the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, on the banks of the holy river Ganges. There are 100–200 Westerners there every winter. The period from May to September is very hot and wet. Therefore most Westerners prefer to leave the city for that time. These people typically work for a few months in simple jobs or sell Indian textiles or handicrafts in their home countries during summers and then spend the rest of the year in India, living on the money they have earned in those temporary jobs. The Western sojourners in Varanasi claim to have found an ideal lifestyle (see Korpela 2004). In Varanasi, their days are spent in a fairly relaxed way. Many study Indian instruments, some do yoga, meditation or charity work. These activities are mostly conducted in daytime. At sunset, Westerners gather to drink tea on the stone stairs leading to the river Ganges and when it is warm, groups of Westerners often rent rowing boats and go swimming in the river. A lot of time is spent socializing with friends and almost every evening there is a get together in somebody's house: people cook, eat, play music and smoke hashish together until late at night. The population of Varanasi is about two million, but almost all Westerners live in the same area near the river, renting small apartments from local families. Many of them return to the same houses annually and have all necessary household utensils there. Everything they need is within walking distance and the area feels almost like a village.

I backpacked around India for eight months in 1995, and during my few weeks in Varanasi I met a few Westerners who for several years had spent a couple of months there. I found this lifestyle fascinating: it seemed to represent something very different from my own life as a university student. Three years later, I went back to Varanasi to do research on the women among them. There are more Western men than women in Varanasi, but I chose to focus on women because I wanted to see how women staying in India for long periods of time deal with the fact that being a Western woman in India is a lot more complicated than being a Western man there, the role expectations being radically different for women than for men compared to Western countries (see e.g. Kumar 1992, 173). I myself had difficulties as a young blond woman in India and I wanted to see how other Western women deal with the problems they face there.

This text is based on nine interviews which I conducted in Varanasi in the spring of 1998, each lasting one to two hours, and on my participant observation of four months. My interviewees are all 20–30-year-old European women who have been to Varanasi a few times before. After each quotation there is a fictitious name for the interviewee, her correct age and nationality. There are travellers from all over the industrialized world in Varanasi: from Europe, Australia, Canada, Japan and Israel, the Japanese seldom socializing with other nationalities. I concentrated on European women in order to narrow down my research. It seems that among the Westerners in Varanasi, national differences do not play an important role: "West" becomes one when confronted with India and national differences between various Western countries are not emphasized. For example, Italian, French or even Israeli food are all considered Western, that is, non-Indian. The long term sojourners come from various countries and backgrounds but they develop a sense of community and standard ways of thinking and behaving in Varanasi. Therefore, I believe that to a great extent, the views of my European interviewees represent the views of the Westerners at large.

I lived in a house where there were fifteen rooms rented to Westerners. This offered me a good opportunity to get involved with these people. I also participated frequently in the tea gatherings by the riverside and in the dinner parties. In addition to my personal contacts, I found interviewees through a Western charity project. I was of the same age as most Westerners in Varanasi, thus it was easy to build contacts although it took some time to become considered an insider in the group. However, I gradually became good friends with many people there. The Westerners hanging around in Varanasi do not follow strict plans or schedules but instead, their lives are very impulsive. Therefore, it was difficult to plan interviews at exact times and promises were vague. Yet, in general, people reacted very positively to my research and only two women refused to give me an interview.

The interviews were conducted in the rooms of the interviewees. I used open ended questions and allowed the interviewees to talk freely. Many times the interviews turned out to be some sort of therapeutic sessions. People talked about themselves and often, personal problems and crises from the past came up. After the interviews, many of my interviewees said that it had been a positive and relieving experience because it worked as a self understanding process for them and they found it worthwhile to think about the issues that I asked about. I had assumed that the Westerners in Varanasi would praise India and would try to assimilate in the local cultures but during my research I found that this is not really the case. Instead of becoming "indianised", they become empowered as Westerners. Instead of cultural assimilation, they constantly emphasise their freedom and own independent agency.

As a Western Woman in India

The European women in Varanasi must constantly negotiate between the roles of "being foreign" and "being female" that are sometimes contradictory. In India, there is a clear division between the private world of women and the public world of men (see e.g. Kumar 1988, 62). These visiting European women in Varanasi, however, are also active in the public arena and through local men's abusive comments, they are constantly reminded that it is not the proper place for them (see also Hottola 1999). Many Western men told me that they like India because they can do whatever they want there. This is definitely not true for women. Western women have to be very careful about following certain cultural rules, such as certain dress codes, because if they break them, they are mentally as well as physically harassed. These European women are in a contradictory situation in India because as single travelers they represent independence and freedom but in the Indian cultural context they face restrictions because of their gender.

Sometimes I wish I was a man here, of course, because men are much more free, they can wander around in whatever they like. They can do all these things, they can misbehave if they want. It's not an easy place for a woman, I don't think. (Birgit 27, German.)

It should, however, be noted that the visiting Western men in Varanasi are not necessarily respected by local people since they break so many cultural rules. Nevertheless, this does not cause much harm in their everyday lives; they are not

disturbed as women are. It is interesting that Birgit states above that the Western men can do whatever they like. This is possible only because they are outsiders in India: Indian men cannot do whatever they like in India, neither can Western men in the West. Doing whatever one likes means, for example, dressing in colorful hippie clothes, walking around without a shirt, having long and messy hair and smoking hashish in public. Local men are usually dressed in well ironed trousers and shirts and their hair is cut short. From a few comments that I heard from local people, it seems that they find it strange that Western travellers often use dirty or ragged clothes although they have money to dress well. The looks of the Western men show that their encounters with the local cultures are very different from those of the Western women who have to be more careful about their dress. Therefore, following Lewis's argument, men and women meet "the other" in differently gendered ways (Lewis 1996).

It is common for young local men to harass Western women (as well as young Indian women) in Varanasi. In the streets, comments like "Hello Sexy!" are common. Sometimes, local men also touch women's breasts and bottoms, yet there is no serious threat of rape, or at least not in daytime. The disrespectful behavior of Indian men towards Western women is an unavoidable topic in my interviews and Western women also often talk with each other about their unpleasant experiences with Indian men and discuss how to avoid these situations. All my interviewees have had negative experiences with Indian men.

I've had men grab me, like grab my breasts. It's not a daily occurrence but it has happened a few times over few years I've been here. (Lisa 24, British.)

Such incidents have caused my interviewees to perceive Indian men in very negative terms.

I remember writing my diary ... how can I love a country where half of the population [men] makes me want to puke, really again and again, I feel very often this. (Emma 29, Swedish.)

This kind of statements are very common among my interviewees; they talk a lot about how terrible Indian men are and often ignore, for example, class differences and the fact that it is mostly young men who harass women as the older ones seldom cause any harm. My interviewees claim that, in the eyes of Indian men, Western women are not respectable and it is impossible to escape the image. This clearly shows their gendered position in Varanasi: they cannot escape their gender and the image attached to it.

They see you as a prostitute basically... Like I know they will judge me immediately as a woman, as somebody to fuck. (Sabine 25, Austrian.)

For them tourist women are just prostitutes. And why not touch a prostitute? (Maria 22, Swiss.)

Kumar, an Indian anthropologist and historian, has discussed the sexist comments and abusive behavior of Indian men towards Western women in public areas in her book

about her fieldwork experiences in Varanasi. She argues that many males in urban areas are lonely because they are separated from their village based families. These men see any woman outside the defining sphere of home and family as a target, like a prostitute or a film star, for their frustrations. According to Kumar, one can avoid trouble by acting like a typical married woman (Kumar 1992, 173), which means dressing like married women and not talking to strange men. In other words, being married is equated with being respected and if one is not married one should at least pretend to be so in order to avoid trouble. In fact, it is common for single Western women travellers to tell Indians on trains or in other public places that they are married in order to protect themselves.

It is remarkable that the majority of Western women in Varanasi are single. Their singleness may reflect their individuality in that they want to come and go as they please. Some of the women may be in Varanasi precisely because they do not want to be dependent wives but want to be free. It is ironic that this is in sharp contrast with the cultural environment that surrounds them. As unmarried adult women my interviewees are anomalies in Varanasi as single women are, traditionally, strangers in India (see Stone and James 1995, 130; Tambiah 1989, 416–417; Young 1987) and do not fit into the local cultural context as single men do. Some of my interviewees are aware of this.

A man can be thirty years old without doing very much and without being married. There're many men in India, even in Banaras, who live like this, not doing anything special. But such a woman doesn't exist, not even one. This is why we are much more like strangers and we don't fit in as the Western men do. It is much easier for them to live quite relaxed in India. (Emma 29, Swedish.)

Emma's comment has lots of truth in it, yet, we should not forget that continuing the family lineage is, after all, the duty of sons (Harlan and Courtright 1995, 6) and therefore, also many men face pressure to get married. Nowadays, there are single women in big cities like New Delhi or Mumbai but not much in Varanasi, thus my interviewees are often asked about their singleness in Varanasi.

However, it is not always a disadvantage to be a woman in India; there are also privileges. For example, in principle, women have the right to be served separately and before men. My interviewees are happy to take advantage of such privileges that Indian cultures accord to women. For example, they are often eagerly defending their right to a seat in trains and buses knowing that women should have a priority to seats. They can take the role of a "vulnerable" woman when it helps them but want to act independently when they so wish. This shows that they are active actors with power to consciously play with local cultural rules and norms.

In travel literature, women have often been expected to describe women's sphere of the countries they visit since men writers have not been able to get first-hand information (Hapuli 2005, 138; Ghose 1998, 52). In similar terms, my interviewees emphasize that Western women can get to know Indian women whereas Western men

cannot have contact with local women. In this respect, many of the women I interviewed regard themselves as privileged in comparison to Western men.

If you are a Western man, you will only see half of India. A man will never be able to know Indian women because in India, men and women are living in very separate worlds. Really very separate. Being a Western woman you get to look into both. Being a Western man you will only be able to see it with Indian men. Being a Western woman you can be anything, you can get to know all these women, you can do all the women things, and you can do almost all the men things also. It is a very big privilege to be a Western woman travelling in India. (Emma 29, Swedish.)

These European women in Varanasi can take advantage of being female when they want to have contact with Indian women but they ignore the restrictions imposed on them as women when they want to have contact with local men. Mostly contacts with men are needed when buying goods and services whereas contacts with women are for casual chatting. The young European women in Varanasi are not powerless victims of their gender but actively use it in order to maximize the benefits. The settings for their actions are of course determined by the Indian cultures and they are not free to do whatever they want but there is, nevertheless, room for negotiation and women's independent agency. All in all, they clearly encounter the local cultures as women, which is both a disadvantage and a benefit.

Dressing in Local Clothes: a Strategy to Make Life Easier or Something to Avoid?

Dressing in a non provocative way makes everyday life easier for the European women in Varanasi. The rules of dress include not wearing shorts, miniskirts or sleeveless tops and all clothing should be loose. I know also from my own experience that dressing in Indian clothes reduces the amount of harassment considerably. Kumar's explanation for this is that if one dresses in the local way, people understand a person better and respect him/her more (Kumar 1992, 171).

Most Western women staying in Varanasi for long periods of time wear loose dresses, many *salwar kameez* (a loose dress with loose pants). "Indian appearance" means only clothes as the hairstyles of these women easily reveal that they are not Indian. Many have short hair or dreadlocks, whereas almost all local women have tidy long hair. In fact, the European women in Varanasi clearly emphasize differences between themselves and the local women through their appearance. They seem to dress in Indian clothes in order to avoid trouble, not in order to assimilate. My interviewees claim that it is important for them to try not to insult Indian cultures and customs but one should not try to be like "them" either. Moreover, these women choose to determine themselves what behavior and clothes are insulting to Indians –again, they are independent actors with power to decide how to act. For example, even if they wear *salwar kameez*, they usually do not use the scarf that is an essential part of the dress.

I wear salwar kameez because I like it. It's comfortable and also it's easier. I look a bit more local, not to say that I'm like a local woman but this is what the people wear. But I have dreadlocks and Indian woman should never have dreadlocks. It's like I don't wanna insult their culture, I wouldn't wear a short skirt or something, I don't wanna do anything to insult it... but also I don't have to completely become part of it... As long as I'm not insulting their culture, I don't mind if I don't really fit into it. (Lisa 24, British.)

Most of my interviewees combine Western and Indian clothes so that their bodies are properly covered but there are still clear differences to the local women's way of dressing. A good example of a sign of Indianness is the forehead mark *bindi* (a small sticker on one's forehead). Using it is an easy way to "look local" and nowadays *bindis* are also manufactured for Western tastes. For example, all kinds of psychedelic figures are clearly meant for Western consumers. Local women in Varanasi seem to use only the traditional circles and ovals in their everyday lives, only at special occasions, such as weddings, do local women use the special designs.

I don't go out without bindi. I don't go out without brushing my hair and making my hair nice. Not because of men but because of India. (Maria 22, Swiss.)

Maria seems to connect brushing one's hair to Indian cultures. I would, however, argue that messy hair or untidy appearances are rather characteristics of the counter culture of the Westerners in Varanasi than characteristics of Western cultures as such. Many of my interviewees also have a nose pin. Almost all Indian women have nose pins, yet, we cannot conclude that my European interviewees express Indianness by their nose pins since they have also become fashionable in Europe and America in the past few years. Married Indian women have also anklets, toerings and several bracelets. My interviewees use this kind of jewellery although they are not married and should therefore not use it at all. They thus ignore the cultural meanings attached to the jewellery and use it merely as decoration. Hutnyk has written about the colonial (and contemporary) appropriation of exoticized items: some objects or parts of exotic cultures are commercialized and consumed in the West (Hutnyk 1999, 95). The fact that the European women in Varanasi use *bindis*, nosepins, toerings and anklets although they do not fully dress like Indian women is a manifestation of the phenomenon Hutnyk writes about. This behaviour also shows that they are independent consumers using jewellery to their own taste instead of attempting to assimilate in local cultures.

There exists a common group standard of clothing among the long term female sojourners in Varanasi and breaks from the dress code are almost non-existent. In addition to distinguishing themselves from local women by dress, these Western women distinguish themselves from short-term tourists. This means that one needs to avoid looking like an ordinary tourist (too clean, with clothes and shoes from one's home country), and aim at a peculiar "hippie" style that means a kind of a casual look (that is still definitely not random). Wearing Indian clothes is tolerated as a means to avoid trouble but the "correct" and "cool" way to dress is a mixture of loose colorful hippie clothes and Indian clothes, and it is common to wear *khadi* cotton (homespun cloth advocated by Mahatma Gandhi). The Western women usually have their "own"

tailors who sew for them according to their detailed instructions. In fact, travellers wanted to differentiate from tourists already in colonial times (Ghose 1998, 128–133; Hapuli 2005, 128–129). Nowadays, the amount of both has of course increased enormously. Tourists and the long-term sojourners in Varanasi are actors in the same global arena where it is easy and cheap for Westerners to travel to India. Nevertheless, although my interviewees distinguish themselves from tourists, the clearly foremost “other” against whom they mirror themselves is Indian woman.

My interviewees seem to think that one should not go too far with “acting local.” Dressing in a *sari* seems to be a border that most Western women in Varanasi are not willing to cross. The *sari* seems to be a real sign of otherness. Only one of my interviewees uses a *sari*.

Sari is not for me. It's very Indian and this much Indian I'm not. It's a traditional female dress and I'm not a traditional Indian woman. (Birgit 27, German.)

Why is the *sari* such a border then when *salwar kameez* (although without the scarf) is not? The practical explanation is that it is very easy to use a *salwar kameez* and it resembles Western clothes, whereas wearing a *sari* is difficult for someone who is not accustomed to it. One needs to control one's movements a lot more when wearing a *sari*, whereas in a *salwar kameez*, there is no danger of it falling off or revealing the “inappropriate” body parts. Moreover, a *sari* seems to represent ultimate Indian femininity to my interviewees and they want to distinguish themselves from this: they want to have freedom to act in non-feminine ways as became evident earlier in a quotation where Emma appreciated her ability to “do men's things” in India.

Some of my interviewees claim to wear Western clothes (colorful hippie style trousers, shirts and dresses manufactured for Western consumers in India) in order to express their “true” Western identity. This idea was also common in the nineteenth century travel literature (Grewal 1996, 93–94).

It is also a process of me to go back to using Western clothes, not to be so correct, not to dress like Indians. I mean I'm a Westerner, I'm not Indian. (Sonja 28, Swiss.)

In their talk, my interviewees emphasize that it is important for them not to forget their roots and what they believe to be their “real selves.”

I am not Indian, I am not. I'm also very much a Westerner, I'm a Western woman and I must not forget this. (Jenny 27, British.)

It is common for my interviewees to wear Indian clothes in public and Western clothes at home. In the private sphere, they return to their “real Western selves,” signifying for them independence and freedom as women. It seems almost as if the Indian surroundings were a stage on which they perform Indian womanhood. In the end, following the rules is just a game to make one's life easier because one does not change within: there will and must always be a difference.

I know pretty well the Indian culture by now, I know what they expect from me. And I can play their game... I don't want to provoke, I don't want to disturb. [...] I know what they expect me to be like. Because I know that if I live with these people here, they want to see me in Indian clothes and they want to see me like straight, to be how Indian women should be like. But still, in my mind I'm free. For me it's just a game. (Sabine 25, Austrian.)

The emphasis on difference is very similar to the colonial one, yet there is one clear difference: nineteenth-century Europe had strict rules on how women needed to cover their bodies whereas nowadays women are allowed, or even expected, to show their bodies a lot more. Therefore, the contrast between the Indian and Western rules of women's dress is more profound now. Yet, the basic idea is the same: using the clothes of other cultures threatens one's identity. Talking about a game clearly shows how the Westerners are in a privileged position as outsiders: they can "play Indian" if they want to but they can quit the game whenever they want. Again, they are independent actors who have power to do as they please.

Views on Indian Women: Emphasising a Difference

My interviewees construct a clear distinction between "us" and "them" in the position of women in their talk. In their statements, Indian women often represent what Westerners are not. The "other woman" that arises from the interviews is backward and dependent, lacking all the progress of Western women.

Women are really second class citizens here, I'd never like to live like this. I also see the dark side of India, the way women are kept out. (Lisa 24, British.)

It's a hard life, it's not something romantic and sweet, as women get beaten and things like this. They are always locked in the house and they really don't know anything. (Heidi 27, German.)

This kind of talk is common among my interviewees, and very seldom do they express any knowledge of power positions Indian women can have. For example, especially older women may have a lot of power within the household (see e.g. Harlan and Courtright 1995, 12; Seymour 1999) and the female energy, *shakti*, and several female goddesses are important in Hinduism (see e.g. Kinsley 1986; Grodzins Gold 1994). Moreover, there is space for powerful women in modern India, the extreme example of which is the deceased Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Above, Heidi mentions domestic violence. Certainly, there is domestic violence in India but we must not forget that Europe is not so innocent in this respect either (see e.g. Hearn 1998; Hammer 1998; Heiskanen et al. 1998).

In their talk, their role as travellers is a clear marker that distinguishes the European women in Varanasi from the local women they see. Many of my interviewees say that a travelling woman is doing something that is a privilege of men in India.

I can do things Indian women would never do, like travel alone even, Indian women would never do this. It's like in some ways in India, I'm like a man. The way I act is like a man. I go and I talk to people, I'm able to do this and I go to cinema and ...things Indian women would never do. In this way I'm very different from the women, much more like the men. (Lisa 24, British.)

Grewal writes that in travel literature written by women in the nineteenth century, a clear opposition was constructed between the mobile and free English female traveler and the immobile and unfree "Eastern" woman (Grewal 1996, 66), just as happens more than a hundred years later today. In reality, many Indian women travel nowadays and did so already in the time of colonialism (ibid., 133–229); poor women travel for work, the better-off for leisure, particularly for visiting relatives. Today's Western travelers view India from a very different perspective in comparison to the colonial travelers but their conclusions seem to be surprisingly similar. Only the way of traveling has changed from the luxurious colonial setting (Ghose 1998, 127–128) to the low budget backpacking. It is worthwhile to note that today's budget travelers do not meet professional women or women from Indian elites or upper middle class who travel in first class or by plane. Moreover, the distinction that my interviewees make between Western women and Indian women in regard to travel is actually a simplification since travel has been a preserve for men also in the West: the ethos has been that men travel whereas women wait for them at home (see Urry 1990, 141; Hapuli 2005, 126). Only in the past decades have women gained more independent space in the travel scenes (Urry 1990). Nevertheless, the clear opposition that my interviewees construct in this regard helps them to define themselves as free.

My interviewees seem to think that if Indian women knew about the position of women in Europe, they would prefer it too.

I wouldn't like to be an Indian woman never because one has to be really strong to break out and to be different. She can't even decide what she's wearing, even if it's Indian style, things like this, all these rules, mamma mia, it's life full of rules. Terrible. But I admire them, how strong they are. But they don't know anything else. (Sabine 25, Austrian.)

All the women I met so far are housewives or going to be housewives. But they are happy with this and that's the thing, they're really happy with it. It fulfills their lives to be a housewife. If you don't see anything different and they tell you all your life that this is what you're gonna be and what you're gonna do, it is good. But I think some of them would like a different way of life. (Birgit 27, German.)

It is remarkable that in their talk, my interviewees do not seem to be aware of the differences between women (e.g. due to age or class). There is only one kind of Indian woman for them, and in fact, only one kind of Western woman as well. Moreover, I have never heard any Westerner in Varanasi mentioning any Indian feminist movements. In fact, there were several women's organizations in India already in the 1920's, a point that colonial women travelers often ignored as well (Sinha 1998, 40).

Many feminist scholars have argued that there is a special discourse about the “third world woman” characterizing her as backward, uneducated and dependent (see. e.g. Mohanty 1991; Spivak 1987, 1988; McClintock 1995; Loomba 1998). In this discourse, the heterogeneity of the objects is denied and they are homogenized as one “powerless” block (see Mohanty 1991, 52; Spivak 1987, 150). According to many scholars, the reason for the backward image of the “third world woman” is that progress cannot exist in a vacuum. Without the “third world woman” the particular self representation of Western women as educated, modern, having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and free to make their own decisions would be problematic (Mohanty 1991, 56; see also Hatem 1992, 52; Burton 1992, 150). These theories mostly refer to scholarly discourses but, interestingly, the young European women in Varanasi also explain their own “advanced” position in comparison to the “backward” Indian women. Strong distinctions and simplifications are constantly made in their talk. My interviewees emphasize that they are not like Indian women and would never like to be like them.

I am not Indian, it's not my world, I'd just be very frustrated, not to be able to express myself, not to be able to grow in other than food and good mother. I want more than this. (Jenny 27, British.)

In this comment, Jenny assumes that Indian women have a very limited life as housekeepers and mothers, whereas hers as a Western woman is different from this. This is a common way of thinking, yet reality may not be so glamorous. As many researchers have pointed out, in Western countries the responsibility for the home and children still lies heavily on women and the double burden of housework and wage work is reality for millions of Western women (see Hochschild 1989). We should also remember that it is not so clear that the position of women is better in the West than in some non Western countries (see e.g. Oyewumi 1997). It is not correct to measure the position of women by using “the Western woman” (that as such is not a homogenous category) as a standard point of comparison (see e.g. Moore 1988; McClintock 1995, 383–384).

Grewal points out that in the nineteenth century, the feminist subject was not shaped only in relation to men but also to women of other classes and races. According to her, European feminism has its roots in the encounter between European women and the women of colonized countries. (Grewal 1996, 9–11). Burton writes that British feminists constructed “the helpless Indian woman” as a foil against which they could gauge their own progress (Burton 1992, 137). My material shows that similar processes are taking place among young European women in Varanasi also today. Ahmed argues that when the “other women” are understood to inhabit spaces other than the West, we refuse to encounter them at all (Ahmed 200, 165). In spite of the fact that my European interviewees spend long periods of time in Varanasi, they seem not to have a real encounter with the local women. These European women are physically close to Indian women but mentally they keep a clear distance. I believe a true meeting would threaten the identity they have constructed for themselves as opposites to Indian women.

The few personal contacts Western women in Varanasi have with local women are often with young unmarried girls. They are not of the same age but they share the same status. The women I interviewed say that they do not believe it would be possible for them to have deep friendships with Indian women since they are so different and cannot really understand the thoughts of the Westerners. My interviewees say that they may have Indian acquaintances but real friendships they can have only with other Westerners. Here, real friends are defined as people who share the same kind of values and ideas.

Most people are illiterate here, they know so little, they've seen so little of the world that the kind of conversations you have, you start to feel superior sometimes. It's very limited how much time I can spend just talking about food and this and that. It's very different, very different life and conversations they have. (Emma 29, Swedish.)

Our lives are so different. The things I think about are nothing like the things they think about. I'm really aware of this. And I have so many more options in my life. I feel connection with them, but not like I'd sit and have a deep conversation with them. We can have a laugh together and a really nice time and giggle. But it's not really deep. (Lisa 24, British.)

In fact, many of my interviewees say that Indian women are not friends even with each other and by claiming this, they implicitly also justify their own lack of contacts with the local women. These European women seem to understand friendship as relationships between individuals. The relationships Indian women have inside their extended families or with their neighbors are not considered to be of the same value as the friendships between European women. Moreover, since my interviewees think that Indian women are locked in the home, they believe that Indian women cannot have friends from school, university, work and so forth.

Here you don't have many friends, especially Indian women, because you are in the house and how you can make real contact then? (Sabine 25, Austrian.)

Yet, on the other hand, my interviewees bring out the feeling of sisterhood as a positive aspect of Indian cultures that "the West" is lacking and they sometimes enjoy taking advantage of being allowed to enter this sphere for women.

I like the way there's such a sisterhood in India because women hang out together, they don't hang out with the men. They all wash together, like here I can go to the Ganges and I can hang out with the women. They tell the men to go away, and the men have to bathe somewhere else. It's really nice, feeling like sisters. (Lisa 24, British.)

Nevertheless, enjoying this sisterhood does not result in friendships and closeness.

An important indicator of Western women keeping distance between themselves and Indians is that all my interviewees say that they could never marry an Indian man and be a part of an Indian family. They could not accept the position where they believe

they would end up as wives of Indian men. They think that even the Westernized Indian men have a traditional family as an obstacle.

I don't think I'd fall in love with a traditional Indian man. I don't think I could just suddenly become a good Indian wife. It's not really who I am. (Kate 25, British.)

My interviewees say that women in India cannot choose whom they will marry and this works as a clear distinction for the independent minded European women. Half of my interviewees have had relationships with Indian men in the past but all of them say they have learned that such a relationship could never work.

The first one and a half years I stayed here, I had an Indian boyfriend, secretly. I must say now with my knowledge about this culture, I wouldn't start with an Indian any relation. It's very difficult to have a relation to somebody that is strongly bound to another culture and to his family. I knew we can never live really as we want to, or as I would like to, as I grew up under such different circumstances. And I'd have to adjust to his family, live in his family house, have his father as my boss. I could never cope with this. (Heidi 27, German.)

My interviewees seem to believe a marriage with an Indian man would mean crossing a boundary that should not be crossed: one should not get so intimate with India. It seems that their choice is either marrying an Indian and becoming fully Indian or not getting involved with Indian men at all regardless of their class, status, educational background and so forth, and remaining as what they believe to be their "real Western selves", that is, independent and powerful –not submissive to the family and culture of one's husband.

Traveling as a Means of Empowerment

In Varanasi, the young European women have been confronted with cultures that are very different from their own. These encounters have forced them to consider more consciously also their own values and cultures. In particular, they have become more aware of their gender. Being in a different cultural environment has made them understand more clearly what it means to be a woman, also in their own cultures. The women I interviewed often criticize the position they have as women in their home countries. For some of these women, being in India and wearing Indian clothes work as ways to escape from Western gender constraints. In India, they do not have to care about their looks in the same way as in Europe. This issue came up when my interviewees mentioned eating disorders and other problems women have with their looks in many Western countries.

India was really helping me with my problem with bulimia. In the West, many women have problems, diet and this, and here they just eat. If they are hungry they start to eat. (Sonja 28, Swiss.)

In Europe, if you look at the advertising, if you look at the media, you see how women have become because of what is expected of them. Some people are like Barbie. Maybe they feel a lot of anxiety because it's not a natural state. There is too much emphasis on weight, the minute you go back there, it's weight, it's if you look light. (Jenny 27, British.)

These kinds of comments implicitly construct India as an authentic place where women can have their natural shape. However, we should not forget that looks are important for Indian women as well, it is just manifested in different ways in comparison to Western countries. For example, jewellery plays an extremely important role in women's appearance in India. Nevertheless, it seems that to some extent by going to India these young European women escape the pressures their home cultures impose on them as women and since they are outsiders in India, they do not feel obliged to obey the rules of those cultures either, that is, they can be independent actors. Looks are important for these European women in Varanasi in the way that they need to dress decently by local standards. However, the Western norms of looking fashionable, thin and fit do not apply to them in India and many regard this as a relief. The fashion among the long term sojourners in Varanasi applies only to clothes and hair, not to the shape of the body. It is ironic that the place where these Europeans choose to free themselves as women is India where gender roles seem to be even stricter than in Europe. Nevertheless, Indian cultures and norms are very important in the process because these European women see their own strength and freedom specifically when mirroring themselves to the Indians.

Also the negative experiences that these women have had with Indian men have caused many of them to evaluate gender relations in their home countries. Some of my interviewees mention that men in their home countries are almost as bad as men in India. In a way, it is even better in India because there a woman has the right to refuse to talk to a strange man and even get angry if a man just looks at her. In Europe, women do not have that right and cannot escape being regarded as sexual objects.

Here I feel maybe better in the street than in my home country. I think in the West, I feel more fear, I wouldn't say to someone so easily your behavior is disturbing me. I wouldn't feel I can challenge it as much as I can challenge it here. Maybe here it's men looking and sexual attention but in the West, in a city, everyone looks you up down. I feel less physical threat when I'm here. In the West, I don't tend to talk to men too much either because they make the same mistakes that they do here. (Jenny 27, British.)

I feel I have much power being a woman in India. If I don't want to talk, I just refuse, because it's my right not to talk. No Indian woman talks to a man if she doesn't need to. So, if I don't want to talk I just say I don't talk and it's my right. I don't feel rude. (Sabine 25, Austrian.)

These young European women seem to have become empowered in India since they have learned to defend themselves and have become more aware of the oppressive practices they face as women. Pratt and Grewal both write that many colonial women travelers gained a feeling of freedom and empowerment from their travels (Pratt 1992, 171; Grewal 1996, 80; see also Hapuli 2003, 262). According to Pratt, for many

colonial women, traveling was a means to constitute their subjectivity (Pratt 1992, 159–160). My interviewees talk in similar terms – being in India has helped them to see their strength. The postcolonial world seems not to be so different from the colonial one; even nowadays, travel can empower women.

Conclusion

The young European women I interviewed in Varanasi had gone to India for an adventure in an exotic place. However, as they have stayed in India for long periods of time, they have had to give up their outside observer status and define their own position more consciously. Faced with alien cultures, they have been forced to define themselves and the Indian “others” they see. Living as a Western woman in an Eastern environment requires constant negotiation between the conflicting discourses of the roles and places of women. For my interviewees, the result of this negotiation is empowerment and an emphasis on their European roots. They define themselves as being fundamentally different from Indian people and avoid “going native.” The Indian woman especially is a sign of otherness for these European women. Most importantly, independence and freedom of choice are the characteristics reserved for Western women. My interviewees say they would never want to become like Indian people, despite the fact that they stay there for long periods of time and claim to love India. The encounter with the “other” women contributes to the formation of strong Western female subjects in the post colonial context as it did in the colonial situation.

Gender plays an important role in these European women’s negotiation of their position in Varanasi. As travelers they represent independence and freedom but the Indian cultural context imposes certain restrictions due to their being female. My interviewees try to solve this contradiction by playing with their gender: they take advantage of it when it benefits them but ignore the rules when they are disadvantageous to them. This kind of behaviour illustrates well their independent agency. Gender roles in India are very different from those in Europe and this has caused these young European women to be acutely aware of gender questions. In addition to the fact that they strongly disapprove Indian gender roles, they are also critical of women’s position in their home countries. In a way, India has freed them from certain pressures that women in Europe face, although in India they are confronted with other, possibly more visible, rules. Their comments reveal that they cannot escape their gender: they are treated as women and their own views are formed from their perspective as women.

We often tend to think that the main consequence of traveling is to provide people with information about other peoples and cultures. However, instead of learning truly about Indian people, traveling has made the young European women in Varanasi understand their own identities more clearly, that is, they are fundamentally different from Indians. They have looked into the mirror called “India” and see what they define to be their Western selves (see Boorstin 1961, 117). Maybe in the beginning, India was an assault on the senses and a difficult place for them, but they have learned to play the game. They have turned the sometimes unpleasurable experience into their own empowerment. Being a Western woman in India may be a challenge, just as the

Lonely Planet editors declare, but if one survives one can learn about oneself and even become empowered. This empowerment takes place in the context where Western women construct themselves as opposites of Indian women, that is, as strong, free and independent.

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