



Whose Honour is it?

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT *The present attempts to question the patriarchal norms that thwart the self validation of a woman. Drawing from mythology, fiction and real incidents it would probe how the fatal triangle between the religion, orthodox society and patriarchal mindset is undeniably behind the honour killings and subordination of women and as to why woman has always been the symbol of honour in the patriarchal power structure and treated as a mere possession.*

The fatal triangle between the religion, orthodox society and patriarchal mindset is undeniably behind the honour killings and subordination of women. It reinforces that woman has always been the symbol of honour in the patriarchal power structure. She has been treated as a mere possession. During the time of war, communal riots, the women of the opposite group are attacked, molested or kidnapped. This is done to dishonour, not the woman per se, but the community as such. It poses a challenge to the manhood of the community and thereby vengeance is wrecked. Arlene Eisen in her *Women in Vietnam* discloses that US soldiers were instructed for their search-and-destroy missions that included raping of Vietnamese women phrased in political terms. The Ku Klux Klan in the USA used rape as a weapon of terror. In India's colonial history or the partition maelstrom, it was not the rape of women solely but the metaphorical rape or exploitation of the whole race. It was to show the possession of the other race being plundered.

Tasleema Nasreen's *Lajja*, the controversial novel, gives a true account of the attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh and the rape of their women that followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. In a small village, Golakpur in Bangladesh, alone thirty Hindu women were raped. Narrating the tale of savage violence, Nasreen writes,

"... there was also a home at Tikatuli which was looted and from where a beautiful girl named Maya was stolen! Women after all were commodities, and therefore just stolen like gold and silver" (162:1994).

Women suffer for no fault of theirs. Men make them the victims of their wrath and use them as tools to avenge themselves. On the other hand the wronged women are at times ostracized and penalized, for it is thought that they have stained the honour of their male counterparts and the community as a whole. Taking a glance at the Indian mythology we find several such examples where the women are made to suffer for the patriarchal whims.

Sita, the wife of Rama gave up palace life for accompanying her husband to the forest. Her abduction by Ravana, hard life at Lanka, her loyalty and steadfast devotion to Rama, her confidence in him are all too well known to be recounted here. But it is unfortunate that Ravana banished her on the eve of child-birth — on mere hearsay and loose talk by a washer-man regarding Sita's stay at Lanka, questioning her chastity—for he could not bear any dishonor. To prove her purity she had to undergo Agnipariksha.

In Ramayana the dual between Vali and Sugriva is too well known. Tara was the wife and queen of Vali, the king of Kis-

kindhya. Once having gone to fight a demon, he was untracked for more than a year. Thinking him to be dead the ministers made Sugriva the king and the inheritor of Tara. Vali however returned victorious, drove Sugriva away from the kingdom, and kept Sugriva's wife Ruma with him as a retaliatory measure to dishonor and humiliate him.

Ahilya was cursed for no fault of hers. It so happened that Lord Indra, the ruler of heaven, coveting the beautiful wife of Gautama, disguised himself as her husband and seduced her. Ironically it is considered her moral slip that is not forgiven but severely penalized. Innocent Ahilya was not spared but cursed and shunned instead, for having stained the honour of her master. Considering her an infidel woman, Gautama cursed her to become a stone until Rama came to rescue her from her sin. The case in point is that the actual accused, Indra is not blamed and it is Ahalya who is considered an unfaithful woman, who brought dishonour to her husband. It is through severe penance that she absolved herself of the sin she did not commit consciously, for she was unable to recognize Indra.

Renuka was beheaded for Rishi Jamadagini's honour because she was enamoured of the reflection of a handsome Gandharva. Draupadi's predicament is all too well narrated in Mahabharata, She faced the ignominy of being dragged into the court by Kaurvas, her husbands' enemies. They try to disrobe her in public to humiliate and dishonour the Pandavas, who merely reduce themselves to weak-kneed silent spectators.

The relatives of a woman, who refuses to toe the chalked path, face criticism and take it as a dishonor. Amba in Mahabharata, suffered for the honour of the men in her life — her father (King of Kashi), King Salva (her paramour) and Bhishma (her kidnapper). Shashi Deshpande's short story "The Inner Rooms" is woven round the travails of Amba, When, after rejecting Prince Vichitravirya and declaring her love for Salva in the open assembly she was exultant:

'I cannot marry this man ... I had already chosen Salva, the King of Saubha, before I was brought here. I had already promised myself to him. You had no right to bring me here.' Heads had nodded in reluctant approval; and, looking at them, Bhishma had let her go. She had been exultant. She was the winner. And how easily victory had come! (1993:96-97)

Amba's joy was short-lived for, the 'very rules she had invoked in her favour, worked against her.' Going to Salva, offering herself as his wife, she encounters flat refusal since Salva thinks that having been defeated by Bhishma, Amba rightfully belongs to the kidnapper's family and it was not honourable for him to accept her at this stage. He curtly states, making it clear,

"Bhishma defeated me. You now belong to him. I will be dishonoured if I take you for my wife" (1993:98). Returning to Vichitravirya, where people said she belonged, she found that he too was caught in the net of honour and dishonour. He too said, "And so you come back to me. But I can't marry you. How can I when you have loved, when you may still love maybe, another man?" (99). Turning to Bhishma she asks him to make amends and marry her for he was the cause of her plight. His answer too is the same, he says, "You forget my vow of celibacy. I can't break it. That will be dishonourable" (99). Caught in the rigmarole of honour and dishonour, she decides to put an end to her life thus ending her suffering.

In Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins* Lalitha is not punished by her family but the author lets nemesis work and punish her for tarnishing the honour of the family. Similarly in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the stronghold of male domination is brought out by Roy with deft touches. Ammu's non conformity to the extremely traditional community's social code results in tragedy. In the eyes of the rigidly conservative society, Ammu had dared to subvert or challenge its values by falling in love with an untouchable. She guards her secret liaison with Velutha with care, not because adultery or licentiousness worries her but because the thin margin between the demands of the 'self and the demands of the community make her fearful. This also shows her partial surrender to the patriarchal pressures of the community that makes "Edges, borders, boundaries, brinks and limits" (3) and lays down "love laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much" (328). The institutionalized tyranny punishes both the lovers. In her attempt to realize her autonomy she has to pay a heavy price. The police officer at the Kottayam Police station brands her a "Veshya" and the community stands up against her. On the other hand, Chacko's relations with the female factory workers are overlooked as 'Men's needs' and Ammu is dubbed as "a bitch in heat" (258).

In Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, the protagonist, Sara's assertion to pursue her career and later her self-choice in marrying a man outside her community in opposition to her mother, is taken as a dishonor by her mother for, such an independent behavior is socially undesirable in girls. Mother's rancour comes as a declaration that she never had any daughter and that Saru is as good as dead to her. Similarly in Gita Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Devi's depression after her marriage, due to her husband's long, frequent absence and his indifferent attitude towards a wife who bears the humiliation and embarrassment of a barren woman, triggers her elopement with Gopal. By rejecting and walking out of her marriage she

shows signs of rebellion, which a conventional community does not endorse. This fills her mother Sita with a sense of failure and she feels Devi had "torn her respectability, her very name, to shreds" (108).

Fiction holds a mirror to the social reality. The real life incidents of the cases of Sonia and Gudia, which the society hasn't forgotten, project how women are denied the right to self-determination for community's honor. Gudia was forced to join her first husband Arif (who went missing) after he returned from the Pakistan jail, leaving Taufiq her second husband. Sonia was ordered by the Khap Panchayat to consider her husband as her brother. Gudia's decision to go back to her first husband is certainly backed by the Shariat laws, negating herself. She stayed for too short a period with her first husband Arif whereas from Taufiq she bore a child. Her decision is backed by the Ulemas and Muslim intellectuals but one wonders whether it protects and honors the rights of both, the individual and the society. Her self esteem, desires are sacrificed to uphold the honor of the community. It seems nobody regards the rights of the children as they have no say. The decision of Ulemas who tried to uphold the honor of the community perhaps did not realise that Gudia remained torn between the two homes she had and died within a year. Sonia too must have suffered the psychological upheaval and insecurity, hearing the final decision of the Panchayat. Both Sonia and Gudia came under the glare of media. The pertinent question is whose honor did they uphold? What about their own honor, wish, desire and decision.

It is awry irony that women are penalized for any deviation from the set code of morality prescribed for them and the men related to them consider it a dishonour to themselves. This is very well substantiated by the stories of Amba, Ahilya, Ammu, Sonia and Gudia. How the patriarchal institutions supercede the rights of individuals---a woman's own self-esteem, desires etc have no value and are not taken account of but sacrificed at the altar of patriarchy---is brought forth by the above discussion. Society and the acolytes of patriarchy subdue women who try to challenge and subvert the traditional system even if it is effete. The above discussion goes a long way to show the dire need to subvert the existing biased value-system and building an egalitarian world.

REFERENCE

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