

GENDERED BODY, GENDERED VIOLENCE: RECONFIGURING HUMAN RIGHTS AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN SELECT CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ENGLISH SHORT STORIES

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Abstract: A woman does not necessarily or automatically grow into a 'Self'. While 'Becoming' a Woman, she becomes the Second Sex, the gendered subaltern residing at the periphery in an androcentric culture. The social construct of the 'eternal feminine' has confined woman to a socially, culturally and economically inferior status. Woman's image has always been constructed upon man's imagination. Binding her with the concepts of softness, sympathy, beauty and sacrifice, it obliterates her own identity. Even the female body becomes primarily a source of social control in an androcentric social order. Silence becomes the ultimate reality when these bodies are subjugated and violated. In India, specifically, a majority of women live in a society where they are subjected to gender discrimination and violence almost on a daily basis. The denial of justice to these victims of violence begins from their homes and families and this unjust treatment is reflected within the larger community to which they belong. Though brutal and undesirable, death often comes as a respite after a lifelong tale of torture and injustice. The present paper attempts to contextualize and thematize the issue of gendered violence and the silence camouflaging it. It seeks to present a new perspective on violence, thus challenging any simplistic and limiting definition of the term that only engage with its physical manifestations. Masculinity and femininity are both social ideals developed within the matrix of heterosexuality. Once this matrix is challenged, identities become unstable and malleable and can be re-imagined. Contextualizing these focal points, the paper would explore how the select contemporary Indian English Short Stories create a space, a site for contestation of ideologies in an effort to break the silence on gender-based violence by transforming it into a 'speakable' subject.

Keywords: Empowerment, Gender, Violence, Sexuality, Subaltern.

Introduction: The ideologies of domination/subordination within the sexual matrix are incorporated into the individual's consciousness through social interactions and language. Female body is conceived as an essential linguistic reference for male dominated discourse. Materiality of bodies is only a linguistic effect codified by a set of signifiers. Bodies come into play in the signifying process, but the system of signification cannot be condensed into bodies. Aptly did Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter* argue: "If everything is discourse, what happens to the body? If everything is a text, what about violence and bodily injury?" (4). The renowned feminist theorists, Cixous and Kristeva, contend that patriarchy is a specifically cultural and historical context with power relations. Until and unless women gain their bodily rights, the male-female equation is bound to be tilted and lop-sided. Luce Irigaray rightly claims that- "It is important for us to guard and keep our own bodies and at the same time make them emerge from the silence and subjugation" (421). Body has always been an important site for feminist discourse. Female body is most often rendered 'docile' under the domination of patriarchy. It becomes primarily a source of social control in an androcentric social order. Cowering under patriarchal dominion and subjugation, it is never free. The body thus becomes the "practical, direct locus of social control" (*The Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, 2362). Silence becomes the ultimate reality when the bodies are subjugated and self-dignity is wounded.

In an interview with Radha Chakravorty in August, 1999 (cited in Chakravorty), Mahasweta Devi disclaimed all awareness of theoretical concepts and confessed that her sole purpose of writing is to

bring about a social change. In the preface to *Bashai Tudu* she claims- “An anger, luminous and burning like the sun, directed against a system that cannot free my people [...] is the only source of inspiration for my writing” (xx-xxi). In her story “Draupadi”, translated by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, myth and history interact blurring the borderline between fact and fiction. Spivak’s interpretation of the central character as the “gendered subaltern” and the analysis of the story from the postcolonial viewpoint have been widely appreciated both at home and abroad. Set against the backdrop of the peasant rebellion against the wealthy landowners in the Northern region of the West Bengal district, this story depicts the capture and the horrifying brutal rape of a tribal woman, Dopdi Mejhen. Devi uses both the versions of her name, juxtaposing “Draupadi” and “Dopdi” and this makes the story multi-dimensional. The central character is a female rebel involved in the active participation in the Naxalite movement in the late 1960s. Her husband Dulna, who was her partner in the rebellion and whom she loved more than her own blood, gets fired by the .303 gun while trying to quench his thirst in the spring. After his death Dopdi continues the undone job of her husband, making the violent message “Ma-ho” come true. Her determination not to utter the names of her comrades in this mission even in the face of direst situation deserves our admiration: “I swear by my life. By my life Dulna, by my life. Nothing must be told” (265). As the story begins the First Livery shows utter surprise at the fact that a tribal can have such a classical name (do they have any right to possess such names?). Though Draupadi is “wanted”, yet her name does not feature in the list of names of tribal women. Thus Mahasweta Devi consciously plays with this “unlisted name”. Perhaps it will be worth noting that the third person narrative uses the classical version of the name mostly and prepares the ground for interrogating the situation in which “Panchali” was placed when she was married to the five Pandavas in the epic. Devi re-creates the denuding episode of Draupadi. Yudhishthira, Draupadi’s eldest husband, after losing all material possessions in the game of dice bets her only to lose the game again. The exulting enemy Chief orders that she should be presented before the assembly either clothed or unclothed. Since she is married to five husbands, which is immoral, the concept of honour and dishonour does not apply in her case. Arguing thus, he tries to disrobe her but Draupadi is guarded of her honour by the divine intervention. Mahasweta Devi names her protagonist after the classical character but makes this illiterate, poor, tribal woman more powerful than her counterpart from the epic. After she gets trapped and caught in the jungle, Dopdi is brought to the police camp. Devi’s matter-of-fact tone stands as a sharp contrast to the incredible incident that follows immediately afterwards:

Draupadi Mejhen was apprehended at 6:53 PM. It took an hour to get her to “camp”. Questioning took another hour exactly. No one touched her and she was allowed to sit on a canvas camp stool. At 8:57 Senanayak’s dinner hour approached and saying, “Make her. Do the needful”, he disappeared. (267)

Following Senanayak’s orders Dopdi is violently and brutally raped by the military guards again and again. Her breasts are bitten raw, her nipples torn. Her swollen lips bleed profusely. She becomes unconscious when her body can endure no more. But as soon as she gains her consciousness she hears the mockery of the guards who again resume their duty of “making her.” In a language that brings tears in our eyes and questions humanity on the face, Devi describes the episode breathtakingly:

Opening her eyes after a million light years, Draupadi, strangely enough, sees sky and moon...Trying to move, she feels her arms and legs still tied to four posts. Something sticky under her ass and waist. Her own blood... Incredible thirst... How many came to make her? (267).

A compelled “spread-eagled still body”, Draupadi, waits for the end of this terrific torture. In the Indian scenario, the Dalits and the tribals, as a whole Community, are discriminated against but the situation of women belonging to these communities is even more pathetic. In order to teach the members of these communities a lesson, the women who suffer the triple oppression of caste, class and gender are made easy targets. Marginalized and repressed, these “gendered subalterns”, to use Spivak’s phrase, bear silently all forms of exploitations. Originally a Gramscian term for the subordinated consciousness, “Subalternity” was popularized by the postcolonial theorists like Ranajit Guha, Homi Bhabha, Spivak, and others. The subalterns represent the marginalized, repressed and the peripheral. Denuding Dopdi and raping her is the summit of her political punishment for daring to raise her voice against the social

injustice. When Senanayak orders that Draupadi be presented before him, she first surrenders meekly. But there is an immediate twist in the situation when she tears off her cloth and insists to go to him unclothed. She stands before the officer in the bright sunlight fully naked, in defiance of the violent torture she underwent. Her refusal to be clothed stands as a symbol of political resistance as well as the challenging of the patriarchal norms. With bruises and gaping wounds all over her body and her mouth bleeding, she states in a shrill, high-pitched and sarcastic tone that mocks the double-standards of patriarchy-

What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man...There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? (269)

Shivering with an indomitable laughter she confronts Senanayak with the horrid spectacle of her violently raped body, spits blood on his white shirt and challenges him to "counter" [meaning military encounter] her. Though bodily violated, she succeeds in her mission and the officer, fully armed, is for the first time terribly afraid to stand before the "unarmed" target. I fully agree with Spivak's observation in her Foreword to the translation of the story-

It is when she crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could only happen to a woman that she emerges as the most powerful "subject", who, still, using the language of sexual "honour", can derisively call herself "the object of your search", whom the author can describe as a terrifying super object- "an unarmed target". (252)

Thus, though Mahasweta Devi reworks on the ancient story, her protagonist dares to challenge the code of conduct that patriarchal norms have imposed on women. The modern counterpart therefore shows an indomitable courage and is silent no more. The story goes beyond the realm of mere bodily exposure where the "fully clothed officer stands 'exposed' in every way" (Jain, 95).

Violence(s) are without the borders of time and space. During the time of the breaking of Nations, these obviously take specific gendered dimensions. The nation along with its topography was and still is always imagined in gendered terms. A Nation is therefore, always gendered. We may here recall Urvashi Butalia's pertinent observation in "Gender and Nation: Some Reflections from India": "It does not take much to see how woman becomes, at Partition, the sign of the nation, her body the nation's own, its violation, a violation of the nation's body" (109). Since the nationalist narrative is filled with images of the nation as mother, wife, and the female body, women represent the nation both physically and symbolically. Therefore, it becomes the duty of men to protect, defend, and avenge the nation. Women's bodies thus attaining the symbol of the nation's fertility, power and honour, become the properties of the nation. As per this ideology, the nation is adored and worshipped or detested, raped and sullied, its limbs torn apart, its womb assaulted. Since women symbolize the spatial borders they become vulnerable during national unrest. While the bodies of "our" women are defended as borders, "their" women are violated as the other's borders / territories. The grand narrative of nationalism recorded in the history books never articulates these experiences. Women constitute one half of the population of the world, and they play an important role in society. It will, therefore, be very significant to bring to focus the sufferings and sacrifices of women during the trauma of partition of Punjab in 1947. The trouble for the non-Muslims in general, and for the women in particular, started in March, 1947. Young women were abducted and openly raped. Though a separate number of female death and violence(s) were not available, the official figures of deaths in the district of Rawalpindi was 2,263 which were considered far below the actual number. The women were subjected to maximum humiliation and torture. Their agony can be judged by the fact that a number of women jumped into wells to save their honour. "In many villages", writes Urvashi Butalia, "where negotiations had taken place, often women were traded for freedom" (159). The people in general were infected with spirit of vengeance, and took revenge by committing excesses on the womenfolk of the opposite community. Women's experience of the Partition is marked by large scale rape, abduction and forced marriage. It has received special attention of several scholars over the last few years, particularly since the 1990s. They have tried to understand the women's experience of the Partition in terms of gender and patriarchy. Patriarchy constructs women in a peculiar way—her respectability is confirmed to the degree to which she is able

to retain her sexual purity, her sexuality is a threat to her; her body is not her own, and it is not only the question of her own honour, but also that of her family and community. She is the repository of her community's honour. Therefore, in a situation of conflict rape becomes a symbolic form of dishonouring the community. It is interesting that both the rival communities shared the same patriarchal conception of rape. Rapes were accompanied with large scale abduction and forced marriage. It was on the bodies of women that the new national border was marked out; the edifices of the two nation states in South Asia were constructed. Delving deep into women's history has a dual goal: to restore women to history and to restore our history to women. The aim of the enterprise is to make women a focus of enquiry, a subject of the story, an agent of the narrative. The rape and violation of individual women becomes symbolically significant in nationalist discourse and the politics of national identity is the violation of the nation and an act against the collective mass of the enemy nation. "Their" women are forbidden prizes, and as such, a potential site for warfare, both symbolically and literally. Women's bodies mark the vulnerability of borders, and in another sense, women embody the borders. Gender identities and women's bodies become spatial boundaries of the nation. Women's bodies serve as symbols. Mother, wives, and daughters designate the space of the nation and at the same time, the property of the nation. As markers and as property, mothers, daughters, and wives require the protection of patriotic sons. Urvashi Butalia rightly points out:

The loss of "their" women to the men of the "other" nation was of considerable concern to the State at the time of the Partition and perhaps no other issue raised such anxiety among Indian political leaders at the time. A major cause for concern was the numbers of women recovered. Though no one disputed the fact the recovery operation was a humanitarian one and had to be carried out, they were unhappy at the fact that more Muslim women were being recovered and sent back to Pakistan, than Hindu and Sikh women being recovered from what had become Pakistan, to be sent back to India. ... A number of "solutions" were suggested which would help teach Pakistan a lesson. Among this was the holding back of Pakistani women-.... Throughout this fraught and emotionally charged debate there was little concern for the women themselves. (108)

The partition of the colonial nation into two independent nation-states, India and Pakistan, in 1947 was brought about by the primacy of religion, which, to use Benedict Anderson's phrase was "a spent force". In his Presidential Address (Lahore, March 1940) M. A. Jinnah had argued that Musalmans are a nation, according to any definition of a nation, and they must have their homeland, their territory and their state. August 1947 not only saw the establishment of two nation-states, India and Pakistan, but also the moment of inception of new identities, relations, and histories and of their being thrown into question once again. This harrowing event rendered millions widowed, orphaned and homeless. The truth unveiled by Urvashi Butalia in her thought provoking article, "Blood", unfolds a history of gruesome horror:

Twelve million people were displaced as a result of Partition. Nearly one million died. Some 75,000 women were raped, kidnapped, abducted, forcibly impregnated by men of the "other" religion, thousands of families were split apart, homes burnt down and destroyed, villages abandoned. (250)

But how do we embark on a feminist reading of partition? How do we problematize the general experience of violence, dislocation and displacement from a gender perspective? When it comes to expressing the collective madness that prevailed, during and after the Partition of India in 1947, no other writer comes close to the oeuvre of Saadat Hassan Manto. The partition divided Hindus and Muslims who had lived together for hundreds of years. The agony and horrors of partition also gave rise to a new genre of moving art and literature of India. Saadat Hassan Manto, was so aggrieved by a similar identity crisis that it was, partially if not wholly, responsible for his alcoholism and eventual death about eight years after the Partition. A poignant story, "The Return", describes the plight of a girl, Sakina, who gets lost from her father Sirajuddin as they were trying to escape. When her father regains his consciousness, he is in a nadir of despair. Manto describes the tragic situation most expressively:

Then his eyes moved and suddenly, caught the sun. The shock brought him back to the world of living men and women. A succession of images raced through his mind.

Attack...fire...escape...railway station...night ...Sakina. He rose abruptly and began searching through the milling crowd in the refugee camp....Where did he part from Sakina and her mother? Then it came to him in flash- the dead body of his wife, her stomach ripped open. It was an image that wouldn't go away. (11-12)

Sakina is finally recovered from India and brought to Lahore by Muslim volunteers. She has been raped brutally by men from both sides. As a result she is in a state of coma and lies in the hospital bed. When her father comes to identify her, the doctor asks him to open the window. But on hearing that Sakina undoes the string which holds her salwar in place and pulls her garment opening her thighs- The doctor looked at the prostrate body and felt for the pulse. Then he said to the old man: 'Open the window'.

The young woman on the stretcher moved slightly. Her hands groped for the cord which kept her shalwar tied round her waist. With painful slowness, she unfastened it, pulled the garment down and opened her thighs. (14)

Though he uses historical records to bring out the inherent philosophical truths about human nature, Manto never distorts facts. An example will suffice. A comparison of the gruesome incident of the assault of Sakina cited earlier with the official recorded history- "about 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religions different from their own"(The Other Side of Silence, 3)-will support my contention.

While thousands of women were abducted by the men of other religion, hundreds were killed by men of their own families, sometimes even forced to commit suicide- failing which they were burnt, or butchered in order to protect them from being raped by men of other religion or made to bear their children. In his book, *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of the Events Leading Up to and Following the Partition of India*, G. D. Khosla cites the statement of a doctor who was treating a severely wounded patient at the refugee camp in Jhang which may testify to the historical record:

... One of her hands was chopped off above her wrist and then she was thrown into the fire, as a result of which her lower portion got burnt. But she escaped from there and was then thrown into a well with her daughters and one son. (181)

In "Colder than Ice", the protagonist Isher singh abducts a Muslim girl during the riots and rapes her only to find later that she was dead and he had raped a dead body: "Ishwar Singh opened his eyes. 'She was dead...I had carried a dead body...a heap of cold flesh...' " (29).

"The Woman in the raincoat" depicts how a man brings a woman who was driving a car from outside and tries to rape her only to find later that she was an old lady. He lets her go in that stormy night and she dies in a car accident-

That night when you let her out of your house, she died in a car accident. You are her murderer. In fact you are the murderer of two women. One, who is known as the great artist, and the other who was born from the body of the first woman in your living room that night and whom you alone know. (57)

The needs of women have been sacrificed both during nationalist struggle and after independence. During the period of National movement the land and woman got constantly equated for the convenience of the male discourse of the Nation building process. Social and historic constructions, gender and nation intimately participated in the formation of one another. The nation along with its topography was and still is always imagined in gendered terms. Nations are therefore, always gendered. We may here recall Urvasi Butalia's observation in "Gender and Nation: Some Reflections from India": "It does not take much to see how woman becomes, at Partition, the sign of the nation, her body the nation's own, its violation, a violation of the nation's body" (109).

Shashi Deshpande has repeatedly stated that her writing comes out of her own intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in our society and the conflict between her idea of

her own self as a human being and the idea that society has of her as a woman. The epics, created and interpreted by men, also uphold the traditional patriarchal norms and mould our consciousness vis-à-vis the same perspectives. Shashi Deshpande rightly observes in *The Stone Women*:

The fact is, we don't start with a picture of ourselves on a clear slate. Already inscribed on it are things told to us by others, there is what we read, what we gather from the ideas and expectations around us, what we imagine and dream. Myths form a large part of this baggage we bring to our self-image. How we see ourselves, collectively or individually, depends greatly on myths. They are part of the human psyche, part of our cultural histories. (86)

Deshpande's short story "And What Has Been Decided?" weaves a spectacular plot out of the variegated themes- the disinheritance of the Pandavas, injustice suffered by Draupadi, Kunti's order to her sons that Draupadi be shared among all five of them, her relationships with her sons and the daughter-in-law, Krishna's amiable nature and the impending war. In the "Swayamvara" Draupadi had chosen Arjun, disguised as a Brahmin, as her future husband but as she laments- "that was not to be my destiny. I became the wife of five men..." (239). While her heart pines only for Arjuna, her body is shared by all five. She has to live a marital life having no physical or emotional space for her own self. But she accepts her lot and "hammered my [her] heart into submission" (243). Rendered in the form of monologue, this story also voices the queen's resentment against Yudhisthira for using her as a wager. Draupadi, re-located in Deshpande's story, challenges the "Dharmaputra's" assertion of never doing any wrong in his life by retorting back- "When you gambled me away" (238). She was tossed as an object between the two parties in the assembly hall- the Pandavas gambling her away and failing to protect her honour and the opponents humiliating her and trying to disrobe her. The grand narrative of the *Mahabharata* keeps silent on this issue of female exploitation by the pervading patriarchal norms. Violence against women in our country has many forms and intensities. It can be both physical and psychological. The wounds of the latter category are deeper and remain forever. I would like to quote a very significant observation by Malini Bhattacharya on this issue –

In our country, the violence that starts by exploiting the silence of the female foetus even before it is born, spreads out in various forms ...This violence is sometimes overt, but not always visible or recognized. But it is always linked with women's disempowerment. (7)

The narrative presents Draupadi's sense of being wounded by the behaviour of her husbands who neither had the power to protect her honour nor the willingness to avenge her humiliation. Thus, though the male writer of the *Mahabharata* placed the Royal queen in an ambiguous situation by depriving her of any power to control her life, and yet portraying her as the princess and the beautiful queen of five valiant kings, Deshpande makes her come out of her shell and interrogate this ironical position thus empowering her.

Conclusion: To conclude, we may say that the dreams of Indian women and their struggles may differ but their desire to breathe in free air remains the same. When one moves across culture, similar problem can be seen surfacing everywhere. In narrating the plight of characters, the writers mentioned in this paper narrate their nation. The socio-political injustice and gender discrimination depicted in these narratives make these texts the moving tales of suffering humanity. The contexts define the texts and in fact, become the texts. The interface between these creates a space which resonates with the muted voices and the untold trauma of the violated gendered subalterns.

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