Violence, Resistance and the Female Body (Some Theoretical Issues, With Reference To Indira Goswami and Mahasweta Devi’s Women Characters).

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Abstract: Women’s issues and problems have still remained largely uninvestigated till date. On the one hand, there is an increase, even explosion, of research and publications on women’s problems while on the other hand the violence against women i.e. rape, molestation, eve- teasing, domestic violence and institutional and reproductive violence are rampant even today.

This study attempts to explore and understand those crucial nodes and instances when these very vulnerabilities, humiliations and terrible wounds of women are used by them as counter-offensive against all the oppressive forces ranging from patriarchal structures, the state and its apparatuses, hegemonic social structures and ideologies to the complex contest and collusion of forces of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernities’ that exploit women in different and ever-changing guises.

Key Words: Women, Violence, Resistance, Issues, Oppression.

I. Introduction

The contemporary history of academic interest in problems of women’s status, roles, contributions and other issues present many paradoxes in India. On the one hand, there is an increase, even explosion, of research and publications on women’s problems since 1975 owing to the International Women’s Decade, while on the other hand there are several critical areas, in arts and aesthetics, literature and humanities along with politics, economics and science and technology, which perhaps could provide basic clues to the paradoxical situation facing women in this country and which have still remained largely uninvestigated. My topic – Violence, Resistance and the Female Body (in Arundhati Roy, Indira Goswami, Phul Goswami and Mahasweta Devi’s writings) -- is an attempt to interlink the issues of violence that women are subjected to in plural and intensified forms, the particular vulnerability that ensues from possessing the female body, and the modes whereby patriarchy works towards legitimising different means of controlling and oppressing women.

This study also attempts to explore and understand those crucial nodes and instances when these very vulnerabilities, humiliations and terrible wounds of women are used by them as counter-offensive against all the oppressive forces ranging from patriarchal structures, the state and its apparatuses, hegemonic social structures and ideologies to the complex contest and collusion of forces of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernities’ that exploit women in different and ever-changing guises. It also calls into question the ‘commonsensical’ and highly emotive claim that violence can be overthrown only by counter-violence. That is what the female protagonists of the texts I have chosen for analysis exhibit. Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things, Indira Goswami’s Saga of Kamrup and “The Offspring”, Phul Goswami’s “The Final Shore” and Mahasweta Devi’s “Draupadi” are complex works that engage with the troubled question of women’s resistance to bodily violence. My study frames these texts within relevant theoretical perspectives and attempts a close critical reading of the stories to explore not only the nature of women’s bodily oppression but also the varied and complex means by which women fashion forms of resistance to that oppression. The female body, thus, becomes not only the site of often terrible patriarchal punishment, but also the locus of contest and subversion.

Through the protagonist of her story “The Offspring”, the young Brahmin widow Damayanti, Goswami penetrates the crude and dark realities of the social system where a woman is nothing but the possessor of ‘the womb’. She is valued because of her womb, which is her greatest asset and without which she is nothing but a beast of burden. In her short story “Draupadi”, Mahasweta too delves into the state generated violence and the political repressive forces comprising of the government, politicians, bureaucrats, feudal lords and the state-backed hooligans for whom a woman is out and out a commodity. The female body is subjected to different punishments by humiliating and hurting her productive and reproductive power, her sexuality and morality and above all by abusing her political, legal, social, economic and human rights. Draupadi’s gang rape in police custody is not only the severest punishment or police torture that is inflicted on any suspected culprits but an abuse of every possible right that a free born citizen inherits in a free country with a democratic set up. Devi mounts a sharp critique of the protectors of law and order who seem to relish their power to violate the
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constituents and the fundamental rights guaranteed by the country to its citizens. Both Goswami and Devi locate their narratives in socially and culturally specific contexts to tell their stories of violence and both of them focus on the idea that a woman’s oppression is not an isolated misfortune under one man’s tyrannical authority. The most threatening phenomenon is that women are at the receiving end of an entire system of social structures and practices based on the fascist ideology that men are, and should be, superior to women.

Among the atrocities and violence committed against women perhaps the most heinous one is Rape. The intensity of this crime to which the female body is subjected shatters the victim’s mental, physical and psychological being.

In her path-breaking work, Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape (1975), Susan Brownmiller aptly calls rapists the ‘shock troops’ of male society. She says further that if one woman is raped then all others are controlled by the fear of rape. As a result women’s mobility is limited and her choices circumscribed. This results not only in personal and bodily loss of freedom but impacts materially on women’s lives thus disempowering them as economic and socially ‘productive’ beings. For instance, women may be excluded from many night jobs and parts of town that might give them more economic opportunities. Leghorn and Parker (1981), commenting on the pervasive culture of ‘machismo’ in Brazil, reveal that Mundurucu men threaten to punish with gang rape any woman who walks unaccompanied by other women. And unfortunately it is not considered ‘rape’ because it is not done by ‘force’. In Ethiopia the case is even worse. The method of obtaining wives through kidnapping and rape is socially and morally recognised by the society that further limits many women’s mobility severely. Since many rural women here live on isolated farms where there are no other women to accompany them when they venture into the public sphere, the vulnerability of these women is particularly intense. The repercussions of systematic violence are found in other areas of their life as well because the few opportunities that exist for the training and education of young women are usually miles away from their homes. These random examples underline the pervasive and systematized nature of rape as a form of patriarchal control and punishment that finds expression across cultures and is complexly inflected by class, race or caste disempowerment. These examples also find resonance in the context of Indian society.

Mahasweta Devi’s disempowered and wretched women – Dhoul, Sanichari, Josmina and Chinta, to name a few – are the victims of sexual violence and all the possible kinds of related exploitation. In the story “dhouli”, the eponymous protagonist is the lower caste gendered victim of the upper caste Misrilal; Sanichari, in “Rudali”, is the victim of her poverty; Chinta, in the story “chinta” is subjected to the patriarchal practices of her own class; and the dark and illiterate tribal woman Josmina, in “the fairy tale of rajbhasha”, is a figure of utter subalternity before the strong, muscular and giant Punjabi. The deliberate use of the lower-case in the titles of the stories by the translator perhaps implies the insignificance and commonplaceness of the stories of these wretched women.

Josmina’s husband, emasculated by the hegemonic and aggressive masculinity of the Sardar masters, has no agency or means by which he can protect his wife from being repeatedly molested and assaulted. Similarly, Indira Goswami’s women – Damayanti, Durga, Giribala, Saru Gossaini, Dorothy Williams, Padmapriya and even the poor Nimai Rabha – meet their terrible fate in the violence inflicted upon them by patriarchy under different names and banners, sometimes in the name of caste, class, religion and gender and sometimes in the name of tradition and community. Despite fighting very hard all of them meet their tragic fates at the hands of men.

Rape is, of course, only an extreme manifestation of the continuum of violence that women, particularly of the disempowered sections of any culture, are subjected to. Battery, sexual harassment, abuse and a myriad other violations are only shades in a spectrum of violence that women encounter as everyday experience. Therefore the intention behind the sexual harassment and assaults are to influence women’s behaviour in a constant and more generalised way than actual rape. These perpetuate the masculinist ideology that women belong in the home, that they should serve all men at all times, or that sexual services are part of any employment a woman might have.

When it comes to wife-abuse and domestic violence, in all cultures women who are beaten up by their husbands or lovers are likely to be blamed implicitly for not being good wives and mothers and conforming to men’s expectations of them. Wife-beating exists in almost every culture on earth. A woman is beaten every eighteen seconds in the United States alone (Leghorn and Parker, 1981: 157). And despite cultural variations, the legitimacy of violence against women is embedded in almost all languages. One only needs to remember the North African expression, “Women and camels need to be beaten,” or the French variant, “Women, like walnut trees, should be beaten every day.” An old Chinese saying goes, “A wife married is like a pony bought; I will ride her and whip her as I like.” And, of course, in the Indian context the examples are too many to cite.

Among all the crimes committed against women, the institutional and reproductive violence is perhaps the most frightening as it is enacted under the cover of state and institutional sanction. Many women whose behaviour defies male boundaries wind up in institutions where they are ‘treated’ in the name of healthcare. Women in mental asylum and prisons are stigmatised and violated in the guise of medical care. In
many countries of the world women inmates are sexually tortured and raped in the prisons. The case of the North Carolina prisoner, Joan Little, who killed her jailor as he attempted to rape her, showed clearly that women are commonly and continuously sexually assaulted by prison guards in the United States under the threat of physical harm or even death (Lindsey, 1978: 91-94). Kathryn Burkhardt’s report (1973) finds that in some prisons, up to eighty percent of the women are given thorazine, librium or other drugs daily to keep them ‘manageable’. In the mental hospitals the abuse is rampant. Women are treated worse than male inmates and if they shed their docile image and fight back they are sent to the violent wards of mental prisons. Although detailed research on the abuse of women in Indian institutions is still to be carried out, it seems reasonable to assume that the statistics and findings would be as, if not even more, disturbing.

The few instances cited above are not meant to be a comprehensive cataloguing of the different forms of violence that form the defining reality of women’s lives. Rather, they are meant to be read as metonyms, or perhaps as random but telling symptoms of a pervasive culture of gender violence that marks even the most ‘modern’ or ‘developed’ of societies. But, even while underlining the universality of the phenomenon, it is important to recognise the culturally and historically specific forms in which violence is embodied in determinate contexts.

Also, to speak of the victimisation of women by gender violence can only be a part of the story. A rigorous feminist analysis must also address the fact that women are not perpetual and mute victims. If, as Foucault claims, power itself creates the conditions of resistance, it is necessary to identify, dignify and problematise the forms of resistance that women enact in the face of power.

The complexity of gendered resistance is very powerfully captured by Indira Goswami and Mahasweta Devi in their portrayal of violence and its subversion. Examples like Dopdi’s turning into a strong figure of protest from an illiterate, tribal female revolutionary by refusing to clothe her naked and raped body and Damayanti’s aborting her foetus to resist male hegemony in the name of maintenance is actually their remonstration against the patriarchal forces and influence. All of Mahasweta Devi and Indira Goswami’s writings strongly deal with resistance of women against the power that incarnates in different forms – patriarchy, the feudal set up, caste, class and gender ideologies and arrangements.

It would not be wrong to say that contemporary women resisting or writing resistance literature both in India and in the West is largely inspired by the feminist movement which saw a resurgence in the 60s in the West and the late 70s and early 80s in India.

Among the many feminist texts in both regional languages and English, Mahasweta Devi’s “Draupadi” is one of the most extraordinary in its unique representation of violence and resistance. A poor, illiterate tribal woman’s resistance by refusing to clothe her raped and tattered body after being gang-raped in the police custody marks a significant phase in the development of Indian feminist fiction. In a stunning transformation the powerless tribal woman challenges the entire power of a ruthless postcolonial state embodied in the figure of Senanayak. When she confronts Senanayak, Draupadi wipes the blood on her palms and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, “What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?” (Devi, 2002: 36). As the final line of the text says, the resistance of an unarmed target is so strong and intensified that even the chief of the police is terribly afraid to counter the unarmed victim.

Indira Goswami’s Damayanti, the protagonist of her short story, “The Offspring”, too challenges the multiple forces of her oppression in a final cry of anger and defiance. She sleeps with a man lower than her own caste for her maintenance, but refuses to marry him. She conceives a child by him but refuses to let it be born. She aborts the foetus to keep her caste purity intact. The power of Goswami’s story lies in its recognition that women are complexly located at the juncture of gender, caste and community. This often renders their acts of resistance deeply problematic. The contradiction in Damayanti’s action is that while it challenges gender hierarchy, it seems to reinforce caste inequality.

When it comes to Female Body, Lisa Legehorn and Katherine Parker (1981) argue that the dominant (male) culture sees women as breeders, natural caretakers of children, closer to the earth, big talkers, gossipers, passive, devious and indirect. In other words, women are socialised to lack a sense of self-preservation, to remain preoccupied with petty details, and to be home-oriented, emotional, irrational, ‘not serious’, and infantile. As Legehorn and Parker put it, “Good women are benchmarked as those who keep quiet, don’t argue, do their work diligently, and have no needs or demands independent of their families” (1981: 114-115). While each culture has its own specific gender stereotypes, there is also a more global circulation of desired femininity.

Force, physical violence, verbal abuse and other forms of aggressions have always been used to control women’s bodies and gain their obedience. It is always ‘the female body’ which is both the object of desire and the subject of control.

Women’s sexuality has been defined always in terms of violence, pornography and as a potential commercial commodity. Even in the films and media eve teasing, taunting songs, following females and...
eventually winning and taming them is eulogized making it look as if women really enjoy and are impressed by such activities.

Mahasweta Devi’s story “dhoulí” included in the selection titled Outcast (2002) captures the sexual exploitation and objectification that women of marginal sections of society routinely face. The protagonist, Dhoulí, is impregnated and deserted by her lover, Misrilal. She then resorts to prostitution for sheer survival. Meanwhile Misrilal’s brother Kundan comes to know of this and incites Misrilal making fun of him thus:

“That sweetheart of yours that damned dusad woman! Fell in love with a Brahman and became the mother of a son! And now,” (he made an obscene gesture) “the door through which lion entered is being visited by rats and swine!” …

“Yes and everyone’s laughing at us brahmans!”

In another interaction between Dhoulí and Misrilal, Misrilal possessed by Dhoulí’s beauty expresses his desire at which Dhoulí pleads:

“Please don’t play with the poor woman like me, sarkar… Yes deota you’ll play your games and push off, but what will happen to me? Look what happened to Jhalo! And Shanichari! No, sarkar!” At this Misrilal says, “And what if I don’t let you go?” At this Dhoulí says, “What can I do? Nothing. Deotas like you always get what you want! Go ahead, take me, dishonour me.” (“dhoulí”, OutCast, 2002: 10).

Every culture and age sets up its own values and norms that have defined, regulated and monitored women’s body, beauty, sexuality and character. Women’s everyday docile obeisance have been so idealized and eulogized by the scholars, thinkers and writers of the time that they became commandments and the mandatory code of conduct. Nur Yalman (1962) argues that in the eastern context, the basic fundamental principle of Hindu social organization was to construct a close and tight structure to preserve land, women and ritual purity within its system. Patriarchy is so deeply rooted in the Indian context and its soil that it is very difficult to study caste, class and gender in isolation. Several Indian feminist scholars have explored the imbrications of gender, caste and class hierarchies (See Ambedkar 1979, Chakravartty 2006, Mukherjee 2002, Manorama 2006, Namala 2008). Institutionalized patriarchy has always controlled women’s sexuality in different forms and phases. Caste, class, and gender proved to be the instruments through which violence operated and found its expression into the system. Since women’s uncontrolled sexuality was believed to be a threat to the sanctity of caste, class, and the existence of patriarchy, it has been the object of obsessive surveillance and control.

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