

MUTILATED AND SILENCED: DECODING THE NARRATIVE OF RAPE AMONG INDIGENOUS WOMEN THROUGH SELECT INDIAN MOVIES

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous women are vulnerable to rape as they are safe victims who do not pursue the offender and can be easily silenced. The several reasons for the inhibitions of filing a case against the perpetrator are analysed in this paper in an expository way, significantly on how the perpetrators exploit the loopholes in the law and why women hesitate to report the abuse. The abhorrent violence the indigenous women are subjected is revealed to the world in all its barbarity through three different Indian movies. The films explicitly narrate the unimaginable trauma each female protagonist goes through while gang-raped; the men rape not just to satiate their sexual desires but also to violate the woman's dignity and bodily integrity through violence, power, and domination. This study focuses on interpellation as the root cause of the concurrent oppressions, the female subaltern face within and from outside the communities, as all the inequalities intersect with each other leaving them exposed to exploitations particularly, rape. As a rightful direction towards subverting the existing discriminatory practices, intersectionality in feminism with indigenous women's inclusion will help build sovereignty and empowerment to resist the assaults.

Keywords: indigenous women, gender, discrimination, exclusion, rape, India

INTRODUCTION

Being born a woman in a country with deficiencies in the dispensation of justice against rape can traumatise the victim's body and mind. When the victim is an indigenous woman, the gravity of the crime weakens, showing undue leniency towards the upper caste offenders, foregrounding gender and caste discrimination. The unprecedented rise in the number of indigenous women and girls raped and murdered in India points to their vulnerability to sexual brutality and exploitation and problematises their existence. Rape survivors are unlikely to report the assault due to victimisation, social alienation, fear of retaliation, dehumanising experience during the medical examination, and lack of faith in the judiciary.

In the hegemonic upper-caste society, rape takes on a strong patriarchal dimension of exercising power and control over women. However, adolescent girls, and even small girls are subjected to unimaginable trauma when rape becomes a violation, a permanent injury to the mind and spirit, unless there is a drastic change in the punishments, the perpetrators will continue exploiting the weaker and the oppressed. Given the caste and gender equations, women from lower castes are vulnerable to heinous crimes, particularly in a third world and a developing country like India, where the culprits walk free even after being caught red-handed. According to the National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) 'Crime in India' 2019 report shows an alarming statistics of 88 rape cases every day, with a total of 32,033 reported rape cases, of which 11% was from the Dalit community. (NCRB)

Rape is a nuanced term just as intricate a phenomenon; it is a culturally dynamic concept with scrutiny on victim-blaming, unlike other criminal activities. Women's sexual desire had undergone tremendous changes over the years, from the passive asexual beings to the bold 20th-century women who are sexually active beings, conceptualised the rape culture accordingly.

This emerging view of women as sexual beings invited biased controversies that made women responsible for their own sexual victimisation. "Therefore, if a woman was raped, she must have 'asked for it'" (Donat & D'Emilio, 13). This unfounded argument can easily be proven otherwise, considering the recent brutal rape cases of minor girls in India, aged between 3 years to eight years. Such barbaric cases have rattled the nation, and these scenarios point to the senselessness of victim-blaming. The victim's age, the dress they wore, or the time or place they were at are not the real reasons, but the perverted mentality of the rapist with discriminatory motives led to such atrocities against women.

The sensational Kathua gang rape, which took place on 10 January 2018, sent massive shock waves across the nation where a minor nomadic girl was kidnapped, gang-raped brutally in captivity for four days, and the child's mutilated body was recovered. The news traumatised the whole nation, sending widespread outrage until the CBI took up the case. The charge sheet stated that the motive behind the horrendous crime was to force out the minority nomadic community from the village.

The primary goal of the article is to uncover the hidden motives behind the gang rapes in India, taking into analysis three Indian movies. The secondary goal is to examine rape as a complex act when caste and gender overlap to entrap the lower caste or Dalit women caught in the vicious cycle of oppression. The article starts with a feminist framework of the history of rape and then analyses the violent act in the three selected movies using intersectional feminism as the analytical framework to decode the alienation of the subaltern women.

THE PLURALITY OF OPPRESSION

The French philosopher, Louis Althusser disrupts the relation between domination and subjugation through the process of interpellation which was first used in his seminal essay, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, to show how subjects can be complicit in their oppression. According to him, ideology, interpellation, and subjecthood, mutually reinforce each other so that "ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: individuals are always-already subjects" (Althusser, 176).

Judith Butler explores this concept, "I cannot be who I am without drawing upon the sociality of norms that precede and exceed me. In this sense, I am outside myself from the outset, and must be, in order to survive, and in order to enter into the realm of the possible." (Butler, 32). Women are historically contingent to forcibly shaping the gendered identity to be socially inclusive, but upon dispossessing the femininity by subverting the rules of oppression, the patriarchy reiterates that they are the weaker sex.

In many cases, this is done through physical assault or rape when men show their masculinity by brutally violating a woman's body and thereby violating her becoming. By engaging in such savage acts, men terrorise women to position them as 'the second sex' (Beauvoir) and forbid them to a private space beyond which they are not permitted to tread. In a hegemonic caste society, this is no rarity as the patriarchal capitalist society doubly oppresses women. Women become passive receptors of the paradoxical nature of an autonomous body as Butler puts forth gender as a doing, a continuous process of performativity, the "stylised repetition of acts" (Butler, 33) that must be performed to be categorised by the gender norms, "Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment". (Butler, 232).

Gender is sociologically and culturally constructed and embedded in one's consciousness so that there is relational inequality between the binaries, men and women, which impose restrictions on women. These power relations in societies are sometimes implicit and, in some societies, explicit. The gender perspective in the indigenous community is a matter of grave concern as women lack agency and face multiple discriminations within and from outside the community.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has the 'theory of society that closely connects with Butler's performativity; Bourdieu sees power as culturally and symbolically created and constantly re-legitimised through an interplay of agency and structure. He calls this act of re-legitimation 'habitus', which are socialised norms that influence behaviour and thinking. Habitus is 'the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them' (Wacquant, 316). When Simone de Beauvoir brings in the authenticity to oneself as the quintessential dimension to gender, Woolf intriguingly states the matrix of gender, "It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly". (Woolf, 627). According to Butler, gender is associated with behaviour as sex is assigned by the presence of sexual organs and gender by sex. In other words, one is gendered when the body is sexed, and then, one has to adhere to the societal norms of being feminine and masculine. Gender becomes a performance, and Butler uses the term performativity to show the never-ending process of doing gender. She also suggests a solution to this paradox of the autonomous body, which is to be 'masculine female' and 'feminine male', embracing the ambivalence of both. However, the patriarchy has codified the rules for being women, which is a fixity, and when women resist the prevalent dominant male ideologies and attempt to move beyond the boundary, they are punished.

Women are kept at the peripheries by categorising their work as informal and unpaid; their work in the private sphere is unaccounted for in the public sphere. They are marginalised as caregivers and not allowed to break

away from the conventional society to become policymakers but are subjected to social alienation in the 'male stream' society. The subaltern women are oppressed on many levels owing to the existing gender imbalance reinforced by the coercive patriarchal power, the capitalist class division that creates multidimensional poverty and the racial discrimination at institutionalised levels of ethnicity. The interaction of gender, class and race make the subaltern women indentured to oppression through subordination.

Feminist movement is limited in scope concerning the indigenous women's empowerment, "If feminism is advocating for women's rights and equality between the sexes, intersectional feminism is the understanding of how women's overlapping identities — including race, class, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation — impact the way they experience oppression and discrimination." (Dastagir). Juliet Williams, professor of gender studies, defines intersectional feminism as, "Intersectional feminism is a form of feminism that stands for the rights and empowerment of all women, taking seriously the fact of differences among women, including different identities based on radicalization, sexuality, economic status, nationality, religion, and language." (ibid). She also propounds the implication of embracing intersectionality,

"Intersectional feminism is especially important right now as we face a situation in which many women are confronting multiple forms of vulnerability... In times like this, there is a real danger that feminism itself can function in an exclusionary manner by marginalizing less powerful and less privileged women and allies — the very people who most need feminism today." (ibid)

Feminism must not be gender exclusive but should acknowledge other differences which subjugate women in various ways. The fragmented experiences of subjectivity and how the patriarchal power structure plays with the matrix of gender, caste and ethnicity can be seen in three movies: "PapilioBuddha, Madathy and Gangor", which showcase indigenous women from three different regions and languages using a realist narrative technique. The women protagonists of the select movies are subjected to double marginalisation as a female subaltern. As Spivak noted in her seminal essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in the insurgency or the ground rules of the sexual division of labour... It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no his-tory and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (28)

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AS A TOOL OF CONQUEST

Papilio Buddha is a film explicitly reveals the Dalit experience from an insider's perspective when the caste spells out the extent of victimisation. The setting is Meppara, and the plot is how the upper caste suppressed the displaced community of untouchables. However, to be a woman in such a setting adds to the trauma. The character Manju is a strong woman who takes up the job of an auto-driver. The other male auto-drivers do not approve of her choice of profession not because of her caste but because she is a woman. They pass heinous and sexual remarks at her, but she does not remain silent as is expected of a woman. The obscenity of language is supposedly men's prerogative, and women who use vulgar language are termed immoral. Manju retorts back using cuss words, and the man questions her arrogance by comparing her to her mother, a passive victim of the oppressive caste and gender fabricated society. She does not entertain their scornful remarks and react by hitting his head with a stone. This hurts him not just physically, but his male ego is affected with twice the intensity as he shouts to his friends that "that pulaya bitch shouldn't get away." (Papilio Buddha)

She teaches the children in her community by running a small school. The auto-rickshaw is the source of her income to cover the expenses of the school. However, the men drivers are sexual predators who do not see her as a human being but as a commodity for pleasure. They do not let her live peacefully. Even men from her community say they cannot resist her breasts. She bares her chest, saying they are engorged with pain. She dares him to suck it out and gives him a tight slap.

They plot against her and attack her as a group to show their 'manpower'. The patriarchy steps in and punishes her by taking their so-called masculinity out on her in the most wilful way. They strip her, brutally rape her taking turns and even urinate on her face. With no end to his anger, the perpetrator sets fire to her auto-rickshaw. Such inhuman acts make the audience cringe even for a moment but what happens, in reality, is scarier than the fiction.

Leena's *Maadathy* is the story of "the unseeable" Dalits who are enslaved by the blind-eyed society to do all the menial works like washing clothes from the menstrual clothes to the clothes of the dead. The women of the PuthiraiVannar community from Tirunelveli are subjugated to unfair treatment compared to their male counterparts.

Many instances in the movie expose the hypocrisy of the upper caste men as they intoxicate the husband and brutally rape his wife, Veni. She is so helpless and fears that someday this will happen to her daughter, Yosana, who is just an adolescent girl whose curiosity makes her vulnerable to the dangers of the male desire. The mother's qualms become true when Yosana steps out of the set boundary to find the man she infatuates about, only to realise the horrendous colour of the patriarchy. The paradoxical system that rapes and murders the young adolescent girl then elevates her as the deity, which echoes in the opening credits as: "Behind every deity, there is a tale of injustice."

The upper caste society builds a temple for the goddess and worships her, but the feminine forms they see around are treated as objects to satiate their sexual desires. The hegemonic caste society which categorised Yosana's community as 'unseeable' ultimately became the "unseeable" literally as their eyes were not open wide enough to treat others equally. *Maadathy* documents the unfair treatment towards the Puthirai Vannar community, who are the lowest in the hierarchical order from those men who have already been subordinated by those above them on the social ladder. Nevertheless, they are not empathetic to another human being but violate her in the most inhumane manner, which is even incomparable to the attacks of wild beasts. Both the rapes in the movie show the helplessness of the feminine women in front of the atrocities of the masculine men.

In *Gangor*, Upin Puri, a photojournalist whose sensational photographs earn him a successful name, captures the Dalit migrant labourer, Gangor, while breastfeeding her child. The photograph appears in the newspaper with the headline: "The half-naked ample-breasted female figures of Orissa are about to be raped. Save them! Save the breast!" This only creates a narrative of exile, brutal gang-rape and whoredom for the subaltern woman, Gangor. Her breasts which seized the gaze of many, is torn apart by the repressive state apparatus, the police who gang-raped her leaving nothing but scars in its place. The coercive act mutilates not just her body but her mind that she metamorphosed herself into a whore. The repressive society that could not see the purity of a mother's breast and the woman's chastity commodified the breasts as sexual symbols with their male gaze. Louis Althusser's theory of the State apparatus states-"I shall say rather that every State Apparatus, Whether Repressive or Ideological, functions both by violence and by ideology... This is a fact that the (Repressive) State Apparatus functioning massively and predominantly by repression (including physical repression) while functioning secondarily by Ideology". (Althusser, 80).

WHY ARE INDIGENOUS WOMEN OFTEN VICTIMS OF RAPE?

The long history of abuse of Indigenous women all over the country points to several reasons why there is sexual violence against them and without an end in sight. During the second wave of the women's movement, around the 1970s, several feminist advocates joined hands in supporting the antirape movement. Brown Miller states "that women should organise to combat rape was a women's movement invention" (Miller, 397). However, it is not a matter of gender, victimisation becomes rampant in the Dalit or indigenous community, and thus, intersectional feminism is imperative.

Rape is a contested term with reference to its motive as the word suggests rape is to seize or take by force. An early typology of rapists by Groth and Birnbaum defined *rape* as "a sexual behaviour in the primary service of nonsexual needs" (Groth, 13). Rapists were divided into three groups based on their intent: anger rapists, power rapists, and sadistic rapists, the latter being a fusion between sexual and aggressive motives. A well-validated taxonomy of rapists termed the Massachusetts Treatment Center Rapist Typology (MTC: R3) identified four primary motivations for rape: opportunity, pervasive anger, sexual gratification, and vindictiveness (Knight, 304). In the psychoanalytical approach, "rape was conceptualised primarily as an act of sex rather than an act of violence" (Donat&D'Emilio, 12). In such a case, the rapist is not considered a criminal but a psychological deviant, a process Scully (1990) terms the "medicalisation of rape" (Scully, 35).

Early psychological theorising on rape tended to focus on clinical explanations, including blaming poor parenting, castration anxiety and repressed homosexual inclinations, lack of social skills, and being sexually starved or sexually insatiable (Bryden & Grier, 175). However, soon the situation changed, and women were receiving the accusations even when they were the victims. Women were recognised as sexual beings during the twentieth century, unlike the past centuries when they were treated as asexual beings with no sexual desires. "Therefore, if a woman was raped, she must have 'asked for it'" (Donat&D'Emilio, 13). The way they dressed was termed provocative; the time and the place became other factors that made women complicit in their own victimisation. The patriarchal society is keen to point the finger at women and unearth a plethora of evidence for victim-blaming.

Victim shaming is the next phase of turmoil the rape survivors go through, starting with evidence gathering, police interrogation, which is literally verbal rape, medical examination including the Per Vagina Test, an

equally traumatising experience as the sexual assault and the exhaustive courtroom corroboration. The rape of a girl of 'easy virtue' scrutinised the victim's sexual history, thereby misleading the act of violence to the extent of validation through a witness to call it a rape. The survivors of rape do not speak up or file a case as they go through the atrocities and the idiosyncrasies of the rule-ridden patriarchal society leading to re-victimisation. The uneducated indigenous women face double the burden, and they are silenced by all the above-mentioned consequential procedures in pursuing the rapist. Davis believes that the issue of rape cannot be examined without looking first at its historical context; "the license to rape emanated from and facilitated the ruthless economic domination that was the gruesome hallmark of slavery" (Davis, 175).

The society that deliberately ignored male sexual violence and punished women survivors through the ordeal of giving evidence in a way promoted rape culture. "The act of rape was seen not as an end in itself, but as a means of enforcing gender roles in society and maintaining the hierarchy in which men retained control" (Donat&D'Emilio, 14). There are barriers and deficiencies in prosecution and the lack of appropriate laws to punish the rapists like the rapist being a minor, penetration by a foreign object, sodomy etc. which do not come under 'rape' by the law. The loopholes in the law and the several conditions laid down in the act of the Sexual offence to officially consider it a 'rape' need to be dealt with a paradigmatic shift for this social evil to be curbed. Susan Brownmiller's book, *Against our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975), contended that all rape is an exercise in power and that the function of rape is "nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (Brownmiller, 15).

Also, previous research identified multiple gendered cultural factors associated with sexually aggressive men, including acceptance of the use of violence against women; hostility toward women; belief in traditional sex roles, a gender hierarchy, patriarchal ideology, impersonal sex, and male control of women; male sexual entitlement; and adversarial attitudes toward women (McPhail, 317).

CONCLUSION

The solution to this would be the subversion of the serious existential threats with regard to gender, race and class by enabling women to mobilise by involving them in the policies that will affect them and reduce the inequalities across all dimensions by bringing in a gender perspective both on individual and systemic levels. Such a paradigm shift can reconstruct the society to cause a revolution for those unseen women, who are unheard and unspoken. The vicious cycle of rape can be broken only when the State Apparatus fulfils the obligation to amend the laws, investigate and punish those responsible for sexual violence, and promote the fundamental rights of women, particularly indigenous women. Solidarity to the survivors with sensitivity would lead more victims to come forward to expose the crime against them, which can promote empowerment and resilience. Indigenous-themed films and books should amplify the message of support and inclusivity to break the pattern of violence through raw narratives.

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