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**THE UNHEARD CRIES OF SILENT WOMANHOOD: A STUDY OF  
BIKASH RANJAN MISHRA'S DEBUTANT FILM CHAURANGA**

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**Abstract**

From ancient days to the present, casteist ideologies of Hindu society slacken the progress of human civilization. The caste- ridden society always draws a line between the high caste and low caste in the name of religion and scriptures. These all are nothing but man- made discrimination, a game of power politics in silencing the 'Other'. In Indian social background the untouchables are known as Dalits. These are marginalized groups without voice and identity. They live on the fringes under extreme poverty, humiliation and exploitation. Women, all over the patriarchy, are subject to abject exploitation, physical molestation and mental agony. The upper caste women suffer under the crushing power of patriarchy in a claustrophobic atmosphere of domesticity. Bikash Ranjan Mishra's debutante film *Chauranga (Four Colors)* unveils the gloomy and enigmatic account of women's oppression and subjugation in the caste- ridden phallogocentric world of Hindu society. The suffering and humiliation of three women characters in the film question the very role of caste and patriarchy in their life. The paper aims to explore how the complex dynamics of hegemonic power, caste and patriarchy works in the system of oppression in silencing the voice of the womanhood, a study in three women characters with special reference to Mishra's debutant film *Chauranga*.

**Key Words: Claustrophobia, Hegemony, Trauma, Caste Hierarchies, Phallogocentric, Subaltern, Marginalization**

Cinema, like drama, is a mimetic representation of life. Bollywood Hindi cinema is a very powerful medium which influence our society, its values and cultural ethos. It never turns away

from the harsh realities of the changing scenario of our contemporary social life, its problems and challenges. Hindi cinema's powerful vindication against the hegemony of caste and the marginalization of women should not come as a surprise. The first film, which deals significantly with the theme of untouchability and caste oppression is Devika Rani and Ashok Kumar starred film *Achhut Kannya* (1936). Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959) is considered to be a classic in its projection of social ambivalence and humanitarian appeal against the crude binaries of the Brahmin and the Dalit, virtue and vice, power and powerless, poverty and wealth. Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* (1974) unveils the sordid reality of the Indian caste system. It projects the trauma and psyche of a Dalit woman under the cruel impact of caste and gender discrimination. Govind Nihalini's *Aakrosh* (1980) stands out as a rebel, a movie with a cause which questions the very role and place of women in our caste-based patriarchal society. It is a grim world of the untouchables where a brother has to kill his sister to save her chastity and virginity from the upper caste bigwigs of the village. Since 1980s to the present day, caste, gender, sex and sexuality become one of the significant issues in contemporary Indian cinema. Prakash Jha's *Damul* (1985) and *Aarakshan* (2011) and Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Eklavya* (2007) are the best examples of such films. The most poignant and agonizing representation of the hegemony of caste, gender and patriarchy comes as a shocking tragedy in Bikash Ranjan Mishra's first film *Chauranga* (2016).

*Chauranga* presents a panoramic view of the social microcosm of rural village life in Bihar. The village becomes a miniature India, which unveils a sordid distinction of binaries of class, caste and gender and its oppressive systems. It is a saga of pain, poverty, humiliation and oppression of the untouchables and the exploitation of women, irrespective of their caste and status. The story leads us to a bleak world of the untouchables, a world of poverty, starvation, sexual exploitation and social exclusion. It is the story of a Dalit boy Santu's growing up as a rebel against the hegemony of caste and religion. Mishra presents Santu as an iconoclast who has the 'voice', who has the 'gumption' to fall in love with the daughter of an upper caste landlord. It also throws light on the sordid reality of women's life in the patriarchal society. The three women characters in the film are destined to suffer and their suffering is expressive of the universal tale of exploitation and subordination women have to experience in performing their many roles and responsibilities.

Caste is a tool, a mere system of power politics which caters only the selfish interest of upper caste men. It is a mechanism to control and subjugate the voice of the untouchables, the lowest among the caste hierarchies. A human being never borns as a Dalit, an untouchable or a discarded one. It is the system or the dynamics of hegemonic power and caste that stigmatize them as 'Other'. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay *Can The Subaltern Speak ?* questions the very relations of power in silencing the 'Other' in the post- colonial framework. This hegemonic power and cultural relationship which shapes the subalternity of any cultural or ethno- cultural group helps to formulate the Dalit subalternity among the Dalits in terms of social, cultural and economic structure of Hindu society. Dalit subalternity is the outcome of the complex mechanism of caste, religion, class and power. The orthodoxical society always excludes Dalit from the 'center' as uneducated, mean, despicable and sinful due to their 'karma' in their past life. This age- old tradition and verdict of the caste- ridden society employ a complex dynamics of oppression in the name of religion and scriptures. In return, they are forced to surrender and accept the burden of misery, suffering, servitude, pain, humiliation and perpetual social deprivation.

They (dalits) are arvarnas, colourless and non- descript; or panchamas, those left out after the four caste were counted; an antyajjas, caste born, as if they were an accident, an unwelcome appendix an unwanted tail. (Ryan, 192)

Women, all over the patriarchy have been subjected to exploitation and marginalization. They are thrown into the periphery to live in the flood of tears and subordination of many kinds. This social segregation and alienation of women is not a recent phenomenon, but exists within this social framework in the name of the purdah system, Sati tradition, dowry, child marriages. In traditional Indian society women have to suffer in this suffocated world of patriarchy in performing her role as a wife, daughter or a sexual partner. They are destined to live in extreme mental agony and deadly suffocation. The eternal chain of patriarchy is so strong and heavy upon them that their voice and cries remain unheard for centuries. Among the women, the Dalit women are the most distressed one. They are subjected to triple forms of marginalization- caste discrimination, gender inequalities and sexual violence. Poverty, ignorance and social exclusion aggravate their suffering and torture. In the words of Vaishali Shivkumar:

A very famous statement 'Woman is a Dalit from beginning to the end' seems really a naked truth at this stage just because of this struggle of the Dalit women

against the society, against their own outset and against the traditions their men follow. The patriarchy crushes down the originality, warmth, delicacy, tenderness and even beauty in them. (Shivkumar, 3)

Dalit women feel alienation and estrangement from upper caste Hindu society. The strict laws of society and holy scriptures marginalize women as inferior. But one would easily be tempted to raise questions about the sacredness of such holy books which legitimize male chauvinism and sexual violence on lower class women. The self of Dalit women is torn apart against the bondage of patriarchy. They are thought to be an untouchable, but it is a pity that their untouchability never pollutes the upper caste Hindus in their desire for the flesh. Men need women for their sexual hunger, use their body for their lustful desire and discarded them. They have no choice, have no 'voice' to raise against the repressive mechanism of caste oppression, power and patriarchy. Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* epitomizes the paradox of Dalit women's identity in this caste- ridden phallogocentric society:

Men are visually aroused by women and her bodies. They are less sensitive to their arousal by women's personalities ... while women are less visually aroused but more emotionally aroused. ... Men look at women's bodies, evaluate and move on but their own bodies are not looked at, evaluated, and taken or passed over. (1997, n.pag.)

*Chauranga* chronicles the plight and suffering of a Dalit woman Dhaniya (Tannishtha Chatterjee) against the onslaught of caste stigma and patriarchy. She is an untouchable and her untouchability enjoins her to perform many jobs below her dignity. She has to scrub the table full of leftovers or to wash the feet of the high caste man of position or to surrender her womanly body for the sexual gratification of upper caste landlord Dhaval (Sanjay Suri). But what for a Dalit woman like Dhaniya is subjected to such sexual exploitation? Is she immoral? Is she a nympho or a prostitute? Women have dignity and self- respect. No women can strip tease herself naked in front of anyone. Driven by dire poverty, necessity and complex mechanism of oppression, a woman becomes a whore, a sex partner. Instead of polluting others, they, themselves become polluted to serve as a sex object for male sexual urges.

The Dalit woman, Dhaniya always remains silent and accepts her destiny of continuous rape, exploitation and abuse due to her economic instability. She sacrifices her body to the altar of lust for her elder son's education. Her body becomes a commodity whose price value ensures her food and security. The upper caste Hindu landlord Dhaval exploits her sexual urge upon Dhaniya who is nothing more than a sex object to be dealt with physically and emotionally. She falls an easy prey to sexual violence and rape because she is economically oppressed. Women from the lower classes like Dhaniya never dare to raise their voice because it is better to be raped daily, better to be a whore or nympho to the upper caste Hindus than to pass sleepless nights in starvation, hunger, constant threats and abuses. Finally, she is brutally raped and killed. It is not the fate of Dhaniya alone, but it is the fate of every Dalit woman living in society as 'Other'. Rape and murder are daily occurrences in Dalit community. Dhaniya's missing never stirs an upheaval or commotion in the society. Law and order are not meant for the untouchables. Her cries and agonies never reach up to the deaf conscience of the heartless wastelanders. Her suffering is universal as she represents every woman who is subjected to sexual violence and rape because of their untouchability, social ambivalence, status, poverty and lack of education.

*Chauranga* unveils the pain and agony of suppressed womanhood at two different domains of social construct. On one hand it is the painful portrayal of a low caste Dalit woman Dhaniya, and on the other hand it chronicles the heart- wrenching account of suffering and agony of upper caste woman Nidhi (Arpita pal) and her daughter Mona (Ena Saha). Women, all over the patriarchal society are subaltern. The laws, ethics and morality laid down in the classical work *The Manusmriti* assign various roles to womanhood. Women are always expected to adhere to the role of a happy domestic figure. Our social set up is such that always expect women to pay an unconditional surrender and obedience to their husbands. She must be a woman without grudge and grumble. She must be an adjusted figure with traditional Indian roles, confined to her domestic sphere. The brutal realities of life, seen through the lens of male- dominated world make them lessoned that unconditional surrender and obedience is their happiness and destiny. In this respect Nidhi's suffering is more acute than that of Dhaniya. She is the symbol of suppressed womanhood. She is the embodiment of cultural sign. The mangalsutra, sindoor, veil, bangles bind her to perform her role as a traditional woman. She has no personal likes and dislikes and her 'voice' is silenced by the cruel mechanism of power and patriarchy. Her demarcated sphere only allows her to perform daily chores like pressing clothes, offering Puja and looking after the

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family. Family becomes the space of woman within which the values of Hindu culture are inculcated. She is like a robot who performs and caters the necessities of her husband without any protest. Nidhi's relationship with her husband as reflected in the film is prosaic and mechanical without love, warmth and passion of a husband - wife relationship. She is a typical Indian wife who spends sleepless nights looking after her ailing husband. Her mental agony knows no bounds when she is forced to prostitute with the blind priest, Baba (Dhritiman Chatterjee) for the sake of her husband. The patriarchal system is such that they need woman body and the religion or Scripture sanctions it.

Dhaval's daughter, Mona also falls an easy prey to this corrosive hierarchy of family structures. She is taught by the masculine world to keep her silence as a woman. She like her mother is completely controlled by the dictatorial command of her father. She has to live with the utmost zest and zeal in her demarcated spaces and spheres. She is a helpless daughter who cannot sympathize with her mother. Nor does she able to console her mother's agonizing self. In the patriarchal world love, sympathy, compassion and pity are meaningless words. Her feminine psyche receives a shocking jolt when she finds herself a victim of the lascivious and libidinous intent of the blind priest, Baba. In the grim world of *Chauranga* women have no individuality and identity. They are an object of physical lust and she is not an exception. She is even thrashed badly by her father for the love letter about which she had no idea. She is not like Gowri, the daughter of Kathamuthu in Sivkani's novel *The Grip of Change* who is a rebel, a protesting voice of womanhood who wants to wage a crusade against the dictatorship and tyranny of her father. But Mona cannot stand against her father's cruelty. She is a meek, submissive creature like her mother who gradually learns that unconditional surrender and subordination are the destiny of womanhood. Although as a character she appears as a silent sufferer but her song at the function comes as a revelation, a song with a note of humanism in the dehumanized wasteland of caste- ridden Hindu society. Her song silently wages a war which seeks to dismantle all oppressive binaries that segregate human beings as a subaltern.

The suffering of Nidhi and Mona at the hands of patriarchy and orthodoxical society invites some critical attention. Dhaniya is subjected to sexual violence due to her caste stigma. If caste ensures feminine security and safety, then why the upper caste women Nidhi and her daughter, Mona becomes the subject of sexual exploitation? Nidhi has to undergo through such sexual

nightmares due to the verdict of religion. Mona suffers and is seduced by the blind priest whose blindness gives him the license to grope his hands on the female body. Many questions crowd in our mind. Who made this religion? What is the validity of such religion which demands women body for the gratification of sexual urges? Why is there no such law or fixed boundaries for the men? Such questions remain unanswered and lie hidden in our social structure and practices.

The movie *Chauranga*, thus encapsulates not only the plight and suffering of a Dalit woman, but also presents the mental agony of the upper caste women, Nidhi and her daughter, Mona in the claustrophobic atmosphere of caste- ridden society. It is a gruesome account of scathing human oppression, a social chronicle in itself. It raises some crucial issues to the patriarchal moral code which legitimizes male chauvinism and sexual exploitation of women. It stands out as a rebel, a movie with a revolutionary social cause. It aims at dismantling the crude binaries of power and powerless, upper caste and untouchables, purity and pollution. Their silent cries and agonies of suppressed womanhood wage a war to deconstruct the social outlook towards women's identity and roles.

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- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAgVsme9Zrg> Chauranga Movie.