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Hindu Nationalism and Marital Rapes: Select Short Stories of Shashi Deshpande

Abstract

The incidence of sexual violence during Hindu-Muslim conflict has been attributed to the Militant ideology of Hindu Nationalism. Justification of sexual violence against Muslim women is at the core of their ideology. The patriarchal ideas have normalised sex as a normal expression of male desire. Sexual violence is hardly understood as violence but as sex. The other important issue that we often fail to see is the rapes in domestic sphere. The core values of Hindu Nationalism has contributed to the domestic rapes. The refusal by the Indian law to accept marital rape as criminal act shows how the institution of marriage is placed above women. In the Hindu Nationalism, women have always been defined by the men in their lives, they are somebody's wife, daughter, sister whose honour has to be protected. It either praises or vilifies them who is under the control of men or they are sexually free and a danger to society. Their sexuality is controlled through the institution of family. It is believed that if a woman does not perform this role as dutiful mothers or wives, then the family suffers and then the nation.

Keywords – Family, Hinduism, Indian Women, Marital Rapes, Nationalism

I. Introduction

Golwalkar, one of the founders of RSS, in response to the Hindu code Bill said that granting of right to women would cause great psychological upheaval to men and lead to mental disease and distress. [1] This shows how Hindu Nationalism normalizes sexual violence. In order to understand how women are oppressed in their everyday lives, and how it is justified to protect

the sacred institution of marriage, we need to understand the term sexual violence in its fullest meaning and not just equating violence to non-consensual intercourse. Sadly even such an act is not criminalized to protect the honour of the family and nation.

Hindutva Nationalism considers women as the defenders and guardians of everything that is Hindu. Their gender ideology reinforces the supremacy of the family over the individual woman's desires and ability is limited by their philosophy that family considerations should reign supreme not only in marriage but in career too. The idea of the woman in a Hindu nation is manifested in the concept of ideal mother and ideal wife. Golwalkar said, Hindu women, especially mothers not to opt for professional careers because their attention should be given to family and nation alone.[2] The power relations within the structure of the family are never questioned and the oppression and violence within the family is conveniently ignored for it is maintained that questioning the family structure will dismantle the notion of the sacred, non-confrontational, Hindu family which forms the basis of the nationalist narrative. Hindutva encourages women to think only in terms of responsibility to the nation and not in terms of individual rights.

Chastity refers to denying sexual rights, submissive and by modernism means equality, education and freedom. Hindu nationalists rejects modernism and asks women to obey the ideal of Savitri and asks them to invoke within themselves such single-minded devotion to the ideal, such purity of character and such peerless heroism to serve the family thereby save the nation.

The institution of family reflects the ideologies of Hindu nationalism in which women are oppressed in various levels that are often normalized. The following stories examines this theme, the theme of marriage presented as a trap from which a Hindu woman cannot liberate herself without causing the whole system to collapse.

II. Women as sexual objects in marriage

In Shashi Deshpande's 'Intrusion', the newly married woman protagonist tells her story about the violence imposed on her by her husband. She prefers to protect her dignity but in the end, like most of the middle class Indian women, she succumbs. The intruder in the story is her husband who takes her for granted. She is made aware of her sexual role with which she is forced to identify herself. The story narrates how the sexual act within marriage for man is legal and for women it is rape most of the time, especially in arranged marriages.

The protagonist of the story experiences a sense of fear and disgust throughout the story. She describes the honeymoon place as they move through the fishing nets, “men in checked lungis, sitting at fishing nets, women with bold faces and ornaments.. all the signs of a fishing village”. [3]The fishing village and fishes are metaphor for her who is caught in the net and her husband viewing her as an object for his sexual desire. The husband’s constant advances make him look like a predator that will catch his prey, despite its struggle to get away from him. She imagines a moment in the future while gazing at the sea, revealing her true desires and her longing.

“He would swim, I thought, and call out to me in a lazy and friendly way and I would respond with a wave and a smile. But all this was in the future, possibly, if at all. And at present we were not friends, not acquaintances even, but only a husband a wife”. [3]

Sadly she is trapped even before the journey has begun. There are no choices for her to opt out of marriage. She as a dutiful wife must give in what is expected out of her, thus becoming an object for his sexual desires and producing the sons of the nation, nothing more.

Shashi Deshpande narrates her vulnerability in the face of the sexual advances made by her husband. The attender opens the door to let the breeze in. She is aware of his desire, an awareness of what we had come here for? His voyeuristic gaze made her feel disgusting and embarrassed. Husband describes the place as ‘complete privacy’ where the husband and wife, actually strangers are left to themselves, her sense of disgust and hatred are revealed in these lines.

“There was something furtive about the place, something dead pan about the servant’s face, which made me feel that the men who came here did so with ‘other women’, who would laugh and chat with them, not go through what I was enduring now, Fears, Tremors. The way I averted my face from the beds”. [3]

The sexual urge of her husband sends fear and disgust down her spine and wants to avoid him, but her attempts are in vain. Escaping his sexual overtures becomes very difficult when he asks her to change into her night dress. She tries to escape into the veranda, but she succumbs to his physical control.

“Unwillingly I tuned and went to him, my legs as heavy as lead, and suddenly his arms were round me, his face close to mine, his rough chin scraping, hurting my cheek. His embrace was too sudden, too rough and I wanted to scream, to cry out. But somehow I knew that this was just between the two of us. I turned my face away from him, trying to escape, so that the kiss he intended for my lips landed in the air. He let me go abruptly. There was a foolish, angry look on his face’ what’s this? Why are you behaving like this?’ [3]

It was only natural for the husband to think that it was enough to be married, as the institution is mere sacred and meaningful than the wife's desires and rights. The sexual violence and the image of the prey being pinned down, hurts her dignity.

“And then I woke up to realize that the sound of the sea was real, but I was on a bed, not on the beach, and it was not the sea that was pounding my body but he, my husband, who was forcing his body on mine I was too frightened to speak, my voice was strangled in my throat”.[3]

She sees her husband's act as “intrusion into my privacy, the violation of my right to myself” thus the title becomes more apt “The Intrusion”. In this story, Shashi Deshpande challenges the very foundation of the Hindu Nationalism that women find fulfilment in marriage. She narrates remarkably how woman are trapped in societal roles and sacred institutions. Through entering this institution, she is expected to play her subservient role and protect the honour of her family, from which there is no returning point, only a life of sacrifice and enslavement.

The protagonist becomes the voice for many other married women whose bodies become the site of sexual violence, where the oppression and violence, in its worst physically is legalized by the nation. She depicts the reality of the women's position in the marriage which is otherwise side lined as normal or being of no consequence. The acceptance of her husband - wife relationship deepens her denial of her autonomous being as friend, woman or even an individual but only as a sexual object.

Margret fuller comments, “What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to line freely and unimpeded”. [4]

This seems to be a radical idea and a distant dream for any Hindu women as long as the value of Hindu Nationalism is considered superior than the dignity of women living in the nation.

III. Family honour placed above women integrity

‘A liberated woman’ is Shashi Deshpande's another story that talks about the physical abuse in marital relationships. She brings out the confrontation between a successful lady doctor and a frustrated lecturer. The prejudices of the husband are set against the liberal outlook of the wife. The young woman falls in love with a man of another caste and eventually marries him in the face of severe opposition from her parents. Sadly the success of her in the medical profession becomes the reason for unhappy marriage despite being a successful doctor. She bears the tortures of her husband, continues to be trapped in the bond of marriage.

The narrator of the story is a middle aged man, colleague and teacher of the husband. He narrates their marriage as “romantic run away marriage as the Shelley’s”. [5] The narrator meets the lady doctor after twelve years where she has come to give speech on ‘Medicine as career for women’.

After a week, the lady doctor invites herself to the narrator’s house and shares the reality of her marriage life. She reveals that her husband has started beating her brutally since the day an interviewer pointed out that his wife was providing him bread and butter. When the narrator suggests divorce as a way for escape, she denies saying that she does not want to “exhibit her sores in public”. She turns down his suggestion to take him to a psychiatrist because she thinks he is not aware of his actions that he does at night.

Though the lady doctor’s intellect gives her multiple ways to escape from the trauma, her emotions bind her to her husband, similar to the real life situation of most working Indian women who are torn between emotions and their intellect. The lady doctor is modern in her appearance. She “dresses the part” to be in tune with the modern culture. She is “smart and chic” with “Composed elegance”.

In the beginning of the story, she seems to neither care for traditions or her parents. She elopes with a man of her choice and marries him. However the experiences of married life turns her down to mere “terrified animal”. She even shares her love making experience with her husband to the narrator but she is frightened of the social stigma attached to a divorce or a separated woman. She struggles to part from her husband.

She considered her success as the reason for her husband’s hysterical behaviour and feels guilty. She feels guilty for hurting his male ego. She justifies his act as “the only way, perhaps of taking revenge on her for what she has done to his ego”.

She endures all the tortures of her husband. The narrator comments, “But what really astonishes me is her feebleness, her attitude of despairing in difference surely. She, an educated earning competent woman has no right to behave this way to plug all her escape routes herself and act like a rat in a trap”. [5]

After a few days of the narrator meeting the lady doctor, he comes across an interview of her in a magazine titled ‘A liberated Woman’, much to his amusement. The title of the interview is in total contrast to her real life.

IV. Conclusion

The poll between traditions and modernity that cause her guilt is depicted. Most of the Indian women face dilemma between career and family, and in this tug of war, it is the family that

mostly wins. If they choose career, happiness and their integrity over family, they end up with guilt that overshadows them. The notion that family is important and a woman is nothing without marriage is fed in their minds right from childhood. Women have been raised by nurturing the values of womanhood and motherhood in them. The background for such regressive thinking is perpetuated by the nationalistic values. She knows the root cause of her problems but being an Hindu wife, her greatness lies in fitting into the institution of marriage and protect the honour of her family.

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