

Violence Against Women in Haryana: An Analysis of Popular Discourses

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the violence against women prevalent in the society of Haryana in both explicit forms, such as physical violence, and implicit forms, such as discursive violence in the form of anti-women discourses. Such discourses are significant because phallogocentric language limits women's ability to voice themselves and makes them susceptible to patriarchal dominance. The paper highlights that many sayings—sometimes even attributed to social reformers who advocated for women's emancipation—are used to justify women's exploitation. The idea that development in science and technology can empower women proved to be a myth because, before it could empower women, patriarchal society captured it almost completely. With the dawn of the IT revolution, people became acquainted with a new dimension of space, i.e., virtual space. However, this space is a replica of physical space, and the patriarchy of physical space is a dominant ideology in this space as well.

Keywords: Phallogocentric, Patriarchal Society, Identity, Manliness, Womanhood, Phallogocentric, Revisionary Literature, Popular Sayings, Antifeminist Discourses, Gender Bias, Subordination of Women, Objectification, Cyberspace.

Introduction

The definition of violence includes any attempt to shape individuals' personalities and restrict their multidimensional growth, either through physical means or through the development of discourses imbued with biased ideologies that restrict and control the psychological growth of people in general and women in particular. Various discourses, such as literature, movies, serials, folk songs, jokes, and popular sayings, both reflect and shape human society. Edward W. Said, in his famous book *Orientalism*, foregrounds that discourses have always played an important role in structuring reality because it is "a common human failing to prefer the schematic authority of a text to the disorientations of direct encounters with the human" (93). Intellectuals, philosophers, and writers play an important role in shaping society's doctrines. Mark Robson and Peter Stockwell, in their *Language in Theory*, quote Helen Cixous to foreground that the intrinsic connection between literary texts and the philosophical subtexts is phallogocentric because it is "constructed on the premise of woman's abasement. Subordination of the feminine to the masculine order, which gives the appearance of being the condition for the machinery's function" (66). The patriarchal society employs and canonizes writers who write texts from a male perspective; by using Edward W. Said's argument in his famous book *Orientalism*, it can be deduced that these texts in turn "can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse" (93).

The emergence and evolution of various discourses, especially their phallogocentric nature, determined the nature and scope of the theory of womanhood, which is also brought into physical practice to cater to the requirements of the dominant male world; these discourses are then incorporated into works of art, especially literature and musical compositions. These works of art give rise to a tradition that makes the subordination of women seem as natural as breathing, eating, or any other natural phenomenon. The real physical world is perceived through consciousness, which, is structured as language as propounded in *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; therefore,

We know no world that is not organized as a language, we operate with no other consciousness but one structured as a language-language that we cannot possess for we are operated by those languages as well. The category of language, then embraces the category of world and consciousness even as it is determined by them. (77-78)

Therefore, consciousness forms through direct encounter with the outer world and simultaneously structures that very reality because "Reality is inside the skull" (277), as George Orwell in his *Nineteen Eighty Four* argues in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Further, Mark Robson and Peter Stockwell, in their *Language in Theory*, establish a relationship among language, reality, consciousness, and identity:

Language constitutes reality and identity, and the constraints of language limit the expression of realities and identities that are seen as non-normative. The practice of language, in other words carries dominant social values along with it. The experience of women (and other decentered groups) is denied expression as a result. (2)

Raymond Williams also foregrounds how people's feelings are structured in his works. All major critical thinkers agree that discursive formations through language, literature, and oral narratives have played an important role in subjugating women.

Phallogocentric language restricts women's opportunities to speak for themselves and renders them subversive to patriarchal society. For instance, since ancient times, women have been portrayed as "Mother Nature." This reduces them to a perpetually giving, all-forgiving figure who never demands anything and is willing to suffer anything for the family. Religious discourses repeatedly reinforce these images. Language makes them appear permanent and natural through patriarchal terms like "Mother Earth" and "Mother Nature." Furthermore, nearly all religions consider the birth of a girl child inauspicious. Simone de Beauvoir, in her seminal work *The Second Sex*, quotes many such instances; two of them are

'Blessed be God ... that He did not make me a woman,' say the Jews in their morning prayers,' while their wives pray on a note of resignation: 'Blessed be the Lord, who created me according to His will'. The first among the blessings for which Plato thanked the gods was that he had been created free, not enslaved; the second, a man, not a woman. (22)

The radical statement by Simone de Beauvoir can be used to study the position of women in Haryanvi society, which also considers the birth of a girl child as the result of some grave sin committed in a previous birth. Therefore, no one prays to God to bless a woman with a girl child; rather, they are always blessed with the words, "Shat putravati bhava" (Be thou the mother of a hundred sons).

Similarly, whenever a young bride touches the feet of an elder woman in Haryana, she blesses her with the words, "Dudho nahao puto phalo" (May God bless you with many sons and plenty of milk in the house). The worst part of this matter is that the death of a girl child is celebrated in local oral discourses, as a popular Haryanvi proverb says:

Chhohra mare nirbhag ka,

Chhohri mare bhagwan ki

(The son of an unfortunate dies,

The daughter of a fortunate dies.)

The philosophical foundation of discourse in Haryana's society, especially in rural areas, is revisionary and draws inspiration from ancient scriptures and, often, pseudo-scriptures, which portray women as always subservient to men and as playing only a secondary role in a patriarchal society. This particular nature of discourse in Haryana's society, which women completely absorb, denies them subject-hood and turns them into objects, always at the service of patriarchal society. The discursive formation of anti-women patriarchal ideology is very strong.

To justify the exploitation of women, many sayings are coined by society and even ascribed to social reformers who worked for the emancipation of women to some extent. For instance, the following anti-women saying is ascribed to Kabir Das, a social reformer who worked for the empowerment of marginal sections, including women. This saying portrays women as even more dangerous than a snake.

Nari ki jhain parat, andha haut bhuang

Tin ki kaun gati, jo nit nari ke sang.

(Even the shadow of a woman is enough to blind a snake

What will become of the people who live with a woman?)

It foregrounds the extent to which existing antifeminist discourses have completely captivated the masses' psyche. There are numerous instances in which not only religious discourses but also apparently secular ones are used to subjugate women.

The socialization of women renders her a person with ostensibly intrinsic but negative qualities, such as feebleness, indecision, and excessive patience to the point of irrationality. All of this supports patriarchal society's argument that women must be confined to the domestic sphere because they are not capable of venturing into the world and taking on its challenges.

Many popular sayings circulating in society equate women with animals and low-caste people, thereby justifying violence against women. One such saying is "Dhor, Shudra, Nari, sab taran ke adhikari" (Animals, low-caste people, and women all deserve beating).

There is one more saying prevalent in rural, semi-urban, and even urban areas that reduces women's individuality to their capacity for procreation: "Aurat ke to kukh dekhi jati hai" (For a woman, it is the ability to give birth that matters). This assumption reduces women's role to mere childbearing and nothing else, if not in practical life, at least in discourse, which patriarchal society always tries to translate into practical life through various means, ranging from persuasion to the use of force.

There is a saying that reduces women's individuality to property, especially land, which only a strong man can possess. According to the saying, "Zamin joi zor ki, zor ghati hor ki" (Land and wife are the properties that should be kept only by the powerful; land and weak people are taken by the powerful), if a man loses his manliness, he loses both his land and his wife. Another oft-repeated saying objectifies women as sexual objects to be possessed only by strong men: "Kamjor ki lugai sabh ki bhabhi" (Everyone treats a weak man's wife as an object of sexual desire).

This proverb reduces women to objects that only strong men can possess. In Haryana's agricultural society, which observes untouchability, women are denied any such identity because, like land, they cannot have a personal identity. This is aptly expressed in a local proverb, "Beerani ki kai jaat" (Women have no caste).

Women are considered inferior to men in all respects; one often hears people say, "Aurat ke mat to guddi ke pheche ho sai" (a woman is brainless). This is a clear example of gender bias that restricts women's access to education and denies them any responsibility on this pretext. In this way, a woman's sexuality and desires are made subservient to those of men. If, in any case, a woman lacks womanly qualities, she is not considered a woman under social norms. A popular saying about Rani Lakshmi Bai illustrates this point of view:

Harbolan ke mukh se hamane suni kahani thi,
Khub lari mardhni, wo to Jhanshi wali Rani thi.

(We heard from the folk singers a story,
The Queen of Jhansi, a mardani, fought bravely)

Instead of the feminine word "janani" or "janana" (woman), a newly coined term "mardani" is used. The word "mardani" denotes a woman's bravery and courage, but, as the word suggests, it is essentially an idiom of a patriarchal society. It poses a challenge for us to determine whether the extraordinary activities and achievements of women can be narrated at all from a perspective other than a male one. This patriarchal idiom denies Lakshmibai the status of womanhood. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, also emphasized the prevalence of the same mindset when she says:

But in speaking of certain woman...are not women although they are equipped with a uterus like the rest.... It would appear, then that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity. (13)

This means that biological structure alone is insufficient to consider a woman true to her nature. She must conform her behavior to the social concept of womanhood as projected by the male-dominated society.

The idea of being a woman, along with the concept of womanliness that patriarchal society creates and imposes on women, is naturalized through corresponding discourses and other measures. Due to the assimilation of phallogocentric discourses and other pressures, women could not completely escape this image. Because male versions of femininity are detrimental in nature and scope, no alternative is accessible even for women; therefore, women themselves are made to assimilate to men's versions of women as authentic, as Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, foregrounds:

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as feminine. (295)

However, this subordination of women did not occur at any particular moment in human history. The subordination of women originated in the primitive age. Her biological structure was the first important factor that led to her subordination. However, during those days, both male and female members had to struggle independently for sustenance, and the female of that era was as strong as the male; still, she had to depend upon the male, as Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, foregrounds:

In any case, however strong the women were, the bondage of reproduction was a terrible handicap in the struggle against a hostile world. Pregnancy, Childbirth and menstruation reduced their capacity for work and made them at times wholly dependent upon the men for protection and food... and as nature failed to provide women with sterile periods like other mammalian females, closely spaced maternities must have absorbed most of their strength and time. (94)

The subordination of women that began in the pre-civilization era intensified as societies progressed toward civilization. This development liberated people, especially men, and gave them time to produce various discourses that represent the world from a male perspective. During the medieval period, this creature known as the woman was produced through oral and written discourses, which were either sung or enacted on stage. In the modern age of science and technology, cinema and television have replaced older methods. These new modes of communication have greater reach and can produce a stronger aesthetic effect. In this new era, women are subjugated by being represented in two ways. First, as an active participant who dresses elegantly, takes initiative, and is ambitious, this image of a seemingly independent woman proves nothing more than bait for male viewers. The capitalist society that at one point seems to liberate women from daily drudgery objectifies her in a very subtle way, as Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, foregrounds.

[t]o make herself on erotic object. The purpose of the fashion to which she is enslaved is not to reveal her as an independent individual, but rather to offer her as a prey to male desires; thus society is not seeking to further her projects but to thwart them. (543)

It seems that in this age of democracy, under the pressure of the feminist movement, the condition of women has improved. Still, patriarchal society has evolved new modes of subjugating women. Through advertisements, fashion TV, and porn movies, the female body is converted into a commodity, a consumable item. All this is done so cleverly that the victims are persuaded to sell themselves, feel proud, and consider themselves enlightened and modern for doing so. The development in the field of computers and the internet has taken civilization into a new world of cyberspace and

virtual reality; however, as Cees J. Hamelink foregrounds in his *The Ethics of Cyberspace*, the power structures of the real world continue in the cyber space:

The social relations that obtain in the physical world do not disappear in the virtual world.... Unique gender relations for example do not go away as men and women sit down in front of their computer screens. Misogynist macho types will most likely just be 'digi-machos' in virtual reality. (10)

The Internet has emerged as a major outlet for selling sex. In fact, sex is one of the driving forces behind the Internet's growth. Various porn websites feed male lust for female bodies, fueling it and resulting in child abuse, rapes, and many other sex-related crimes.

On the other hand, religious, social, and family movies reinforce existing gender bias and violence against women by depicting her as a toy in the hands of a male protagonist who traps her, wins her, risks his own life, and becomes her master. Such discourses seem to suggest that her only destiny is to be won by a man.

On the other hand, the new era of capitalism and technological advancement traps women in both ways: if she is active, she herself goes into the trap; otherwise, the trap comes around her. Any other discourse that could enable women to become truly independent is not allowed to gain momentum because the first two are powerful enough to restrict their full growth. It is true that at a particular moment in history, the existing discourses determine what should be counted as knowledge and truth.

Terry Eagleton, in his *Literary Theory*, quotes Freud, who reveals that "the motive of human society is in the last resort an economic one" (131). Thus, the privileged classes create and reinforce possession of the material world, including women, who are treated more as property than as individuals, through discourses that have proved an even more powerful weapon than physical means. However, these intellectual methods of social control do not remain static; as Juliet Mitchell states in her essay, "Femininity, narrative and psychoanalysis," "any society changes its social structures, changes its economic base, artifacts are re-created within it. Literary forms arise as one of the ways in which changing subjects create themselves as subjects within a new social context" (407). Like other societies, Haryana's society has also changed over time, bringing new means of subjugating women.

Repression is a universal phenomenon across time and space; no society is without some form of repression of its members. However, as Terry Eagleton notes in *Literary Theory*, people "are prepared to put up with repression as long as" they "see that there is something in it for" themselves; "if too much is demanded of" them, "they are likely to fall sick" (132). In Haryana, women are repressed to the point of sickness. Under such circumstances, women today should avoid being trapped in the earlier-mentioned aesthetically perfect but antifeminist discourses. They should explore the third option mentioned above, gain more knowledge and experience, and develop their personalities so they can become truly independent. In this way, they can emancipate themselves if they work hard in the right direction.

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