

## Intersecting Oppression: Gender and Violence in Selected Indian Novels

Tanvi Garg and Tanuja

### Abstract

Violence is an imposed barbaric act of propagating injustice and brutality on someone. It is not solely limited to physical but goes beyond emotional, psychological, and active-passive domains. Be it American society or Indian society, women have always been placed at the receiving end of gendered violence. *Matrubhoomi: A Nation without Women* (2003) directed by Manish Jha and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) written by Angela Carter, and *I have Become the Tide* (2019) by Githa Hariharan show varied violent societies for women as well as men. The violence targeted towards men involves more physical violence than mental or emotional violence as opposed to violence targeted towards women. Since the concept of honour is imposed on women's bodies, the prime target of violence for women becomes the female anatomy. Thus, through the above mentioned texts. This paper attempts to study the similarity and difference in imposition of violence on men and women and the similarity and difference in treatment of women and men despite cultural and societal differences.

**Keywords:** Gender, Violence, Dystopic Societies, Gender Fluidity, Women's Bodies, Masculinity.

Violence is a concerning aspect of human society, crossing over spatial and temporal boundaries. It affects not only individuals but also communities, even nations. Violence is a complex issue. It manifests in numerous forms—from physical aggression to verbal, psychological and sexual assaults to even socio-economic and structural harm—leaving no part of a society absolutely unaffected. The most visible form of violence in society is physical, often overshadowing the other forms of violence that are not overtly evident.

Violence, thus, extends to anything that robs one of bodily autonomy or agency, such as in the cases of forced marriages, female genital mutilation, sexual assault, the negation of identity, etc. Violence is inherently linked to

power, and sometimes power becomes intrinsically abusive. It is worth noting that violence can stem from a power imbalance, but it is often attributed to the more powerful party. The paper proposes to delve deep into the complex nature of violence and its multifaceted manifestations. The paper also aims to study violence in correlation with gender disparity in society and its implications on individuals as well as society at large.

The two terms—gender-based violence and violence against women—are often used interchangeably; most incidents of violence against women are perpetuated because of gender-based discrimination, as it affects women more than men. Perpetuation of violence towards someone because of their gender is the substructure for gender-based violence, and its disproportionality primarily towards women is concerning. However, one cannot rule out this kind of violence's effects on men either, no matter the percentage of the disparity. The basis of gender-based violence is an imbalance of power—a power that is essentially non-existent in most cases for women. Nonetheless, this power imbalance moves beyond the gender binary and includes identities such as non-binary and queer people equally in its influence. Social and cultural structures, values and norms that govern society are often the source of this kind of violence and are sheltered by a practice of denial and silence.

The paper attempts to discuss and highlight the grave issue of gender-based violence with regards to masculinity and femininity through *Matrubhomi: A Nation Without Women*, *The Passion of New Eve*, and *I Have Become the Tide*. Freedom from violence is a fundamental human rights issue, and in every society, every human deserves freedom from violence, irrespective of their gender. Any violence leads to a systematic, oppressive hegemonic power structure, especially gendered violence that cultivates a hetero-normative society and follows the principles of patriarchy. In Indian society, patriarchy operates on multiple levels, sometimes depriving men of power.

Any violence theory needs to be gender sensitive to not neglect the gendered aspect of violence, lest, in doing so, it will inevitably perpetuate a dominant patriarchal predominance. Consequently, the issue of violence targeted towards one because of gendered reasons will either be partially studied or wholly neglected. This is why a feminist lens is a prerequisite in the

study of violence, as it provides a deeper understanding of violence as a concept and practice by analysing how it is embedded in patriarchal structures of power. As Cynthia Cockburn argues, “Gender power shapes the dynamic of every interaction” (28). This makes the feminist study of violence even more pertinent since the position of human subjects in patriarchal structures is central to feminist theory.

The paper explores femicide through Manish Jha’s *Matrubhoomi: A Nation Without Women*. The film is a 2003 dystopian tragedy based in a village in Bihar that has exercised the practice of female foeticide and infanticide to the point of extinction of women in their own village as well as in all neighbouring villages. The film’s director has portrayed the brutal reality of such practices in different parts of India and has created a cautionary tale to stop this gendered violence. By doing this, he has highlighted the gory outcome it can lead to a nation without women. Jha’s purpose in writing and directing *Matrubhoomi* was to stretch the existing circumstances of disproportionate sex ratio on a global level and create an extreme scenario to unsettle the members of the society who are either silent spectators or willing participants in these sinful practices. It is absolutely terrifying to think that the movie’s plot is not too far-fetched from today’s reality but based on existing circumstances. The movie’s proximity to reality to any other dystopian kind is immensely unsettling.

The violence portrayed in the film is perpetuated in a highly patriarchal social structure that objectifies, worships and tears apart the female body all at once. Just as in most cases of gendered violence, the female body becomes the contention of ownership and power. The only female lead character in the film, Kalki, finds herself trapped in a fraternal polyandrous marriage where even the father-in-law, Ramcharan, claims his ownership over her body. Turn by turn, the five sons of Ramcharan carry out their physical relationship with Kalki each night, saving two nights for their father, the head of the family and, therefore, the most potent patriarch in the family hierarchy. The ownership falls mainly in the hands of Ramcharan because of his involvement in the exchange of goods between him and Kalki’s father, Pratap. The only camaraderie Kalki experiences is with two people—Suraj, the youngest son, who is the only person who makes her feel like she is a living person and their

house help, and Raghu, who is still a boy. Unfortunately for Kalki, the camaraderie and the support do not last long as Suraj and Raghu are brutally murdered by the people they had known their entire lives, his brothers, because of jealousy over Kalki's ownership. The four elder brothers—Rakesh, Shailesh, Brijesh, and Lokesh—want right over Kalki's body, but none ever tries to connect emotionally with her. Only when the emotional connection is established between Kalki and Suraj do they seem to lose their authority and dominance over her. Later on, the extent of ownership slips from the family's hands and reaches the entire village when, in an attempt to help Kalki, the lower caste house-help is killed by the family. Then and there, the already victimised and marginalised upper caste female body of Kalki becomes the land for control by his brothers and all the male members of the lower caste of the village by projecting ownership over Kalki's unborn child.

The punishment Kalki receives for escaping the clutches of her abusers with a lower caste boy leads her to be tied to a pole in the cowshed for months, like an animal. Kalki's position from an asset transforms into an affliction after the incident. Only when Jaggannath, the Pundit, reprimands Ramcharan for trying to find another woman in a place where there are no women left and suggests the latter accept Kalki back in the house, Ramcharan exclaims, "*Kalki shush ho gayi hai humare liye. Ghar se bhai thi. Ramcharan ke ghar se bhai thi choti just wale ke sath*" (*Matrubhoomi* 1:14:50-58). She is then raped night after night by Ramcharan and his sons and Raghu's *chacha* as a form of revenge on her. Kalki's rape by Raghu's *chacha* is not only motivated by his lust but also because women's bodies have always been treated like a site of honour to be looted for revenge as "women are seen in terms of their body only and as a medium for power fights" (Hariharan). Eventually, Kalki gets pregnant by one of her abusers. The news of the pregnancy stirs up another riot between the lower caste men of the village, who claim Raghu's other uncle, Kachra, who is deranged as the father of the child and the upper caste family of Ramcharan, all claiming ownership over the body of the child. Eventually, all these men succumb to their deaths because of violent upheaval in their village.

The idea of perpetrating violence on women to establish male supremacy, and that too when caste comes into the equation, has been a part of Indian

society for a long time. Since Indian society operates on the Brahmanical patriarchal order, men from higher castes always consider themselves above people from other castes, as evident from Githa Hariharan's novel, *I Have Become the Tide* (2019). The story is based on students studying in academic institutions who suffer discrimination because of their caste. The plot also follows the story of a cattle skinner from mediaeval times who faced caste discrimination and could barely escape it until his death. Violence against men and women becomes evident in the novel through various episodes. Ravi, a college student from a lower caste, remembers how their people are targeted for trespassing boundaries set by men from a higher caste. They are punished differently, such as being stoned to death or murdered. However, their punishments become more gruesome, particularly for women raped to maintain and establish authority (of high caste people) over others. Such violent punishments show that hierarchical order spares no one from discrimination, and people are reprimanded irrespective of gender. However,

the gendered dimension of violence against women is different from those of violence against men because while men may certainly be exposed to violence as a result of their socially determined gender roles and norms, the violence they experience – or even perpetrate against other men – rarely if ever contributes to or confirms the overall subjugation of men as an entire subgroup of people. (Hamilton qtd. in Chapman 50)

Ravi realises that the problem here is the acceptance of how high-caste people treat them. Where *Matrubhoomi* shows more physically violent ways in which men are targeted, *I Have Become the Tide* shows psychological ways in which men are tormented. Satya, a bright student, is not even treated as a student or human because he belongs to a lower caste; according to one of his professors, he should not get an education at such a decent place. To ensure that Satya suffers, his professor refuses to sign his scholarship form, depriving him of his fundamental rights; he marks him unfairly to ensure he does not pass his exams. Satya gets a room next to the washroom for a room in the University hostel because rooms are allotted based on the student category. Other students do not want that room, so students from reserved categories are given rooms in a corner where students from other categories

do not really go or try to mingle with them. His classmates and professors constantly question his intelligence and hard work every time he answers correctly in class. Sometimes, they even mock him for cheating or using unfair means to study. All this hatred and prejudices drive Satya towards his death as he commits suicide for being deprived of his bright future. As his family's eldest son, his failure to support them because of prejudices in his University drives him to take such drastic steps.

Though the novel is not set in the future but in contemporary times, this makes it more troublesome because the violence, be it physical or psychological, is still persistent. Both the texts, *Matrubhoomi* and *I Have Become the Tide*, highlight the saddening condition of violence in India, where people are punished irrespective of gender. Although the setting of both texts is different, one similar thing is the treatment of boys from lower caste by men from the upper class. Both Satya and Raghu are killed by upper-class men for trespassing the boundaries set by them. While Raghu's death is a direct murder, Satya is led towards it by psychological torture. Despite temporal and spatial differences, the concept of violence against men by men remains the same. So, even in a patriarchal structure, some men are deprived of any agency, and sometimes, to fulfil that lack, they assert their authority over women. As shown in the movie and the novel, men see harming women as a way of getting back at men from other castes or communities.

However, women still suffer the most as they are seen as easy targets and controlling them means controlling the honour and, thus, the entire community. "The 'honour' of the community becomes coeval with that of men, and while both men and women might be punished for disobeying honour codes, women bear the greatest burden—sometimes with tragic consequences—of upholding community honour" (Srivastava 35). Though the novel does not directly show such heinous crimes being perpetrated on women, it brings forth the struggles they have to face through the memories of other characters. Being from the higher class, Kalki is not given any agency on the pretext of being a woman, so here, the caste and class do not matter because it all comes down to being a man or a woman.

In *The Passion of New Eve*, Angela Carter questions the primitive notions of gender, sexuality and identity. In her novel, she shows a female utopia and

male stance on femininity and goes on to explore what happens when a man has to go through troubles faced by a woman in her lifetime. The questions of gender identity and sexuality all come into play as Carter writes, “I know nothing. I am a tabula rasa, a blank sheet of paper, an unhatched egg. I have not yet become a woman, although I possess a woman’s shape. Not a woman, no: both more or less than a real woman” (79). These words spoken by the protagonist, once a man named Evelyn, turned into a female, Eve, after a forced sex-change surgery, aptly convey how one’s gender identity is not solely based on sex assigned at birth.

The text is based on futuristic cities and begins with the prelude by John Locke’s—“In the beginning all the world was America.” This lays out the base for what is to follow in the novel. Like America, all the world was undiscovered, later invaded and conquered by the more powerful, and like the American land, the female body is also invaded and conquered by those in power, i.e. men in the novel. In *The Passion of New Eve*, the female body is seduced, objectified and abused. Even the idea of a woman is glorified by Evelyn since the beginning: “I’d dreamed of meeting Tristessa, she stark naked, tied, perhaps to a tree in a midnight forest under the wheeling stars” (Carter 3). The fetish of domination over the female body, especially of Tristessa, considered the epitome of femininity by thousands, is established at the novel’s beginning. Ironically, Tristessa turns out to be just a feminine idea and a transvestite and even that femininity is attacked, dehumanised and destroyed. However, Evelyn is imbued with self-awareness. Sexualising and objectifying women does not stop until he himself is put in a female body to experience the horrific realities that most female bodies go through in our societies.

In order to flee the city, he lands in Beulha, a futuristic city and a utopia for females and is ruled by their leading figure, Mother, with an aim to bring a revolution into the world. At this place, Evelyn is turned into Eve as he has to undergo a sex change procedure without his consent. Though Eve is psychologically still Evelyn, he tries to run away from the place and unknowingly reaches the city of zero.

This city is in sharp contrast with Beulha as it is ruled by Zero, a patriarch who considers animals higher in status than women. He is a barbarian, and Eve’s realisation of what difficulties women have to go through comes in the

form of rape by Zero, “the masculinity incarnate”. As a woman, Evelyn is snatched of any agency and falls entirely into the hands of zero. Zero has seven wives whom he treats barbarically. These wives represent the condition of all the women who have been fed the patriarchal narrative and brainwashed into being willing to become part of the hegemony. Zero has forbidden his wives to use language, metaphorically representing the idea that women are silenced through systematic oppression despite having a voice. “Although ‘subservience’ is the wrong word; they gave in to him freely, as though they knew they must be wicked and so deserved to be inflicted with such pain” (Carter 92).

Carter’s work contains fantasy elements but is also rooted in reality. Any feminist dystopia will always resemble the genuine horrors of gender disparity existing in society. Such dystopian narratives may seem far-fetched in today’s society. However, they serve as a warning to society and paint a realistic picture of what might befall humans if some issues are not kept in check. Thus, the three texts show that achieving a male or female utopian society is impossible, be it in contemporary times or in any futuristic society. The holder of power is not essential in this case because no matter who holds power, the question of what one does with it matters the most. Moreover, as the experience dictates, be it a place ruled by men or one ruled by women, it is bound to be doomed. It is generally assumed that women suffer the most physical, verbal and psychological violence from men. However, men become victims of gendered violence as well. The sad reality is that men and women both remain at the receiving end of violence. However, the giving end is majorly held by men, men in power over women and non-binary and men in power over other men in Brahmanical patriarchy in the Indian context. While *Matrubhoomi* gives a grotesque commentary on society and the nature of man in times of desperation, *The Passion of New Eve* is a satire on gender roles. At the same time, *I Have Become the Tide* shows how much violence affects men.

The violence targeted towards men involves more physical violence than mental or emotional violence as opposed to violence targeted towards women. Since the concept of honour is imposed on women’s bodies, the prime target of violence for women becomes the female anatomy. Thus, through the texts,

*Matrubhoomi: A Nation Without Women, I Have Become the Tide* and *The Passion of New Eve*, this paper has attempted to study the similarities and differences in the imposition of violence on men and women and the similarity in the treatment of women in both Indian and Western societies despite cultural and religious differences.

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