

(Un) Silencing Chand in *Heaven on Earth*: A Study of Her Oppression and Revolt

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Abstract: Eminent Feminists like Kate Millet, Simone de Beauvoir etc have tried to voice the concern regarding women's right and privileges. Indian sub-continent too witnessed many changes in this front. People worshipped women as 'devis' but at the same time suppressed them by inflicting violence. Chand in the movie *Heaven on Earth* undergoes transformation from a naïve girl married to an NRI with eyes full of hopes and dreams into a New Woman. The movie resonates with Chand's struggle and revolt to establish her free life and identity.

Keywords: Patriarchy, subjugation, psychological trauma, identity

It was in 1928 that Virginia Woolf said about women "They are simple. So much has been left out "unattempted" in her famous lecture called "A Room for One's Own". Nobody could imagine that it will give rise to a new thinking on issues pertaining to the status and role of women. For achieving racial, social and economic equality with men, women are stepping out of the stereotypical rigid sex roles assigned to them traditionally. Simone de Beauvoir, a French existentialist philosopher, political activist, and feminist theorist, is of the view that history of humanity is history of attempts to silence the female. According to her the truth is that some extremely antique traditions survive even today. She says:

We open factories, the offices, the facilities to women, but we continue to hold that marriage is for her the most honourable career freeing from the collective life (The Second Sex, 1986, p.167).

Betty Friedan an American writer, activist and feminist admits in her book *The Feminism Mystique* that the core problem for women is not sex but identity which has always been denied to them. Friedan declares that

For woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfillment – autonomy self realization, self actualization- is as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences, when it is thwarted (1963, p.282).

No doubt the young women of today are becoming aware of the biased attitude of society. They have started asserting their individuality by challenging the taboos and destructive social norms. While the orthodox women accept their false conditioning into subordination and dependence without demur, the sensitive and iconoclastic women accept the need for individuality and revolt against the established norms by leaving a marriage that has become an emotional wasteland for them. Hence they defy the institutions and break away from their destroyers to seek self-fulfillment. Awareness in a woman that she can live a different but happy and purposeful life asserts self-confidence in her. She emerges as a New Woman, to be more precise, an Iconoclastic Woman, though the process of awakening in her is quite slow and revolt comes after much

retrospection. Patterns of marriage and migration within the Indian Diaspora have generated new forms of abuse that manifest themselves in a wide range of desertion scenarios involving new brides. Indian brides experience violence which involves physical forms of abuse including beatings, sexual violence or forced servitude with the most tragic cases resulting in death. In other circumstances violence manifests in mental torture and harassment for dowry by the spouse and/or his extended family, as well as other mechanism of control, psychological harm, isolation and deprivation of resources. Marriages between Indians living in the Diaspora and Indians living in India involve contemporary global shifts which produce new types of consumerism in the form of escalating dowry demands, requests for consumer goods instead of money and the requirement of lavish designer wedding. In addition there is an increased desirability to parents to have their daughters seek marriages to spouses living and working abroad. Victims of NRI domestic violence are left with little or no recourse overseas. To make matters worse, because these women are married often even their own natal families do not want to take responsibility for them. Some parents fear that their daughter's failed marriage will bring shame upon the family or negatively impact the chances of their other children being able to marry. The depiction of battered women is not only restricted to literature. With new technologies coming in, media too has portrayed and presented women in their own manner. Literature, life and cinema are interlaced and portray convincingly the contemporary Indian psyche.

Heaven on Earth aka *Videsh* is a 2008 Canadian film directed and written by Deepa Mehta. Preity Zinta plays the leading role of Chand, a young Indian Punjabi who finds herself in an abusive arranged marriage with an Indo-Canadian man, played by theatre actor Vansh Bhardwaj. Vibrant Chand (Preity Zinta) is a young bride leaving her home in Ludhiana, Punjab India, for Brampton Ontario, where her husband Rocky (Vansh Bhardwaj) and his very traditional family await her arrival. Everything is new and unfamiliar to Chand including the quiet and shy Rocky whom she meets for the first time at the Arrivals level of Pearson Airport. Chand approaches her new life and land with equanimity and grace. But soon optimism turns to isolation as the family she has inherited struggles beneath the weight of unspoken words, their collective frustration becoming palpable. No one feels the pressure more than Rocky, weighed down by familial obligations. A controlling mother, who can't let him go, a sweet but ineffectual father and a sister whose two children and unemployed husband are also a burden. All live with Rocky and Chand in a two-bedroom house in the suburbs of Toronto. To make matter worse, Rocky is expected to find the money to bring his extended family to Canada. Unable to express his anger, he finds other ways to release it and its Chand who bears the blunt of his repressed rage. Trapped in a world she cannot comprehend and unable to please her husband, Chand is desperate. Hope comes in the form of Rosa (Yanna McInosh) a tough and savvy Jamaican woman who works alongside Chand in a factory where immigrant women from all over the world clear and press dirty hotel laundry. Rosa sees past the makeup that covers Chand's bruised face.

Realizing Chand has nowhere to turn, Rosa gives her a magical root advising her to put it in whatever her husband drinks. The root is supposed to seduce the one who drinks it, making him fall hopelessly in love with the person who gives it to them. Chand's attempts with the magic root lead to surreal incidents and her life gradually brings to mirror an Indian fable involving a King Cobra. As the lines between fantasy and reality converge, Chand and Rocky come face to face with each other and themselves. Eventually Chand comprehends all the surreal episodes in her life and upon separation from her husband decides to go back to India.

The magic of her existence in the trap of an arranged marriage lies in the illusion of normalcy and comparison that she creates within the ambience of abject terror by inventing a double for her husband....a doppelganger, a spirit in human form, who applies balm to all of Chand's wounds and gives her the courage to survive when the very breath of her existence is being choked out. The snake-god from the Chand's backyard in human form assuming the physical traits of her violent husband is a metaphor that illuminates the darkest recesses of Chand's forsaken life. Every time she hides in her bedroom for a dialogue with her phantom-soul mate, Preity Zinta's face lights up with thousands of unexpressed yearnings trapped in a heart that aches for release. Zinta lights up the darkest corners of her tortured and frightened character's heart. Thoroughly deglamorized and devastated by destiny's cruel blows, Preity plays Chand with a dignity and depth that take us by surprise. The drama is generated completely from the normal domesticated sounds and sights. The film creates the growing claustrophobia of Chand's marital domesticity with acute austerity. The one big sequence of violence erupts in the kitchen when Chand's somewhat confused and altogether out of control husband Rocky thrashes his wife for his outwardly-stoic mother's sake. Finally when Chand says goodbye to a life of married trauma we see on her face a mixture of distant triumph and immediate self-realization. Chand has finally come home. For any woman who is a victim of spousal abuse, the escape route is almost impossible to come by independently and for women like Chand, whose sense of cultural alienation only exaggerates her helplessness, it is even tougher. Her memoir is personal and subjective and very inventive. It opens the door to several ways any victim could burrow through tight corners. The murder of gentle dreams of possibility is terribly bloody. Deepa Mehta has done an extraordinary job in using all textures and a unified theme to deal with how people go about living with cold blooded cruelty. And how very delicate and vulnerable a girl bred to marry, now black and blue, asks her husband, her only solace for a future if he doesn't like her. Rocky is shown to be intensely frustrated character; burdened with the responsibilities of having to provide for entire household, live up to the expectations of his parents, dote on his harridan mother and looks at his wife as a thorn who also has demands of him. It is an interesting portrayal of a man who knows only violence as an outlet to unleash his anger and frustration. Rocky is weighed down by familial obligations. A controlling mother, a sweet but ineffectual father and a sister whose two

children and unemployed husband are also a burden. To make matters worse, Rocky is expected to find the money to bring his extended family (through chain-sponsorship) to Canada. Unable to express his anger, he finds other ways to release it and its Chand who bears the blunt of his aggression and anger. *Heaven on Earth* is a feminist movie not because it is a pathetic story of Chand, but because it very brilliantly captures the insanity of violence against an innocent woman in the background of a conservative patriarchal society of which Chand is, no doubt a victim. *Heaven on Earth* also explores attempts to explore the fabric of the family with members of it that oppose wives being battered by their husbands. Chand's acceptance of the treatment meted out to her by her husband Rocky, by her lover, the King Cobra, and the in-laws, shows her subdued and suppressed position in the patriarchal society. Such an inferiorization of woman is not only Indian but a universal phenomenon. She has always been looked down upon as something inferior in comparison to man. Concerning the secondary position of women in the society Juliet Mitchell says that they are

The most physically determined as inferior. This is of course, their position within each race and class. But, as a sex, despite national, racial or class difference, they share the overall inferiorization which is total. (Woman's Estate, 1971, p.67)

Rocky's mother (Played by Balinder Johal) like any old aged mother shown in Indian cinema thinks that the *Bahu* will take her *Beta* away from her. Rocky's harridan mother begins having doubts instantly as she realizes that she may have lost her hold on Rocky. Balinder Johal is superbly effective as the neurotic mother-in-law who is very insecure about losing her only earning son. The warning signs begin to flash almost as soon as Chand enters her new home. Rocky rises to fetch some beer, when his mother instructs Chand to carry out the task, as if the mere walk to the refrigerator would emasculate her son. (Scene time duration=10mins:03secs to 10mins:45secs). The umbilical cord remains a tight noose around Rocky's neck as he assures his mother, after marriage, that his parents still come first. (Scene time duration=17mins:45secs to 18mins:29secs). During honeymoon, when Chand requests Rocky that they should take a picture at the Niagara, Rocky scoffs that they're not tourists and this relentless pessimism begins to chip away at her optimism (Scene time duration=21mins:50secs to 22mins:10secs). Not one for romantic niceties, Rocky orders Chand to remove her clothes while he is freshening up in the washroom. This act proves that for Rocky, sexual intercourse is a mechanical process, not an emotional one. But, Chand on the other hand, in an effort to frame an emotional bond with her husband before indulging in a sexual communion, tries to get to know her husband in a better way by asking him his hobbies. (Scene time duration=22min:41secs to 24mins:40secs). But suddenly there's knock at the door. It's Rocky's mother who makes a lame excuse that she feared her son had been in an accident. It is though amply clear that her real fear is of losing her son to a woman who satisfies needs that she never can. Rocky's mother thus interrupts their honeymoon and actually goads him into beating his wife. Rocky's

mother, then expectedly offers platitude to weeping Chand that Chand shouldn't take physical abuse to heart because it's part of every household. (Scene time duration=24mins:43secs to 27mins:35secs) In a weak moment, Chand scribbles her address (in India) on a washroom wall in a gas station as if willing herself to remember an identity that's gradually being eroded by her strange new life. (Scene time duration 29mins:25secs to 30:00mins)

Another big sequence of violence erupts in the kitchen when Chand's confused and altogether out of control husband Rocky thrashes his wife for his outwardly stoic mother's sake, of course (time duration 35mins:33secs to 37 mins:59secs). At this time the positive approach of Chand's Father-in-law is seen who tells his son to stop continuing merciless beating of his wife. In the wake and wave of feminism, women are fighting against oppression and suppression subjugated on them by their male counterparts but in this scene we find a paradoxical situation where in a woman (Chand) is being oppressed by another woman (mother-in-law) only. To add insult to injury, it's Chand's mother-in-law, who provokes Rocky to beat his wife mercilessly in this scene. To sum up in a nutshell it can be asserted that for a woman her husband's home is heaven and the imaginary inception of her dream-house begins with the onset of her puberty, when she starts imagining her fairy land and future heaven but only few fortunate ones get their dreams fulfilled. Chand's case was incongruous in the way that her heaven of happiness turns out to be hell of havoc and harassment (on the form of domestic violence) for her. Also the dream of moving to Canada—that so many youngsters (leading to brain drain) in the subcontinent have - can easily turn into hell on earth instead of heaven, much like how does for Chand in *Heaven on earth*.

The fate of Chand is indeed the fate of anguished self-craving for companionship and harmony in an emotionally chaotic milieu. The spiritual crisis in Chand issues out of her struggle between desire and reality. She yearns for love and affection. Without strong ties with her husband, she feels lost and isolated. The actual cause of inventing a double of her husband, Rocky, in her psyche is the unfulfilled desire and the perpetual longing for Rocky's love and affection. At the climax of the movie it is seen that Chand follows the iconoclastic approach by quitting her pathetic marriage and rediscovering her identity. She prefers to be in a hell than to be in a heaven (husband's house) which provide no happiness, dignity, solace. Time and again the following line is repeated in the movie which is extracted from Sikh Gurbani: *Better hell than a heaven with no dignity*.

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