

Violence against Wives

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ABSTRACT

Marital violence differs from other forms of violence precisely because it does not appear suddenly between strangers, but always within the framework of a privileged relationship where the equations between the two people are not evenly balanced. This kind of relationship implies the use of power, physical strength, threat and intimidation. Authors work feminist issues into their themes when they question the role of the family in controlling and oppressing women. The needs and sensibilities of the women in the family are not considered a priority, or even legitimate. Literature is often concerned with outrages on an individual or the hidden violence within intimate relationships. In this essay I will show some instances of such violence from some selected Bengali short stories. For this I am indebted to Sutapa Bhattacharya's enlightening article on 'Women and Violence in Bangla Short Stories' published in the book 'Women, Heritage and Violence' edited by Shefali Moitra.

Key Words: Marital violence, threat and intimidation, oppressing women

Second wave feminism popularised the expression, 'the personal is political'. The 'personal' includes those things a woman experiences as a female body as well as those things that one experiences as a woman in the home and workplace. Rape, domestic abuse, sexual harassment, as well as other issues like menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, household work, etc. were brought out of the private realm and into public discussion. Sally J. Scholz says that by politicising these things that essentially had

been hushed up, feminists expanded the understanding of oppression. Women's bodies and homes, not just women's social and political existence, are recognised as the sites of oppression (Feminism 83). Sandra Lee Bartky argues that woman's oppression infiltrates one's psyche to become 'psychological oppression' (85). Women often suffer isolation and a sense of failure when they are victims of domestic violence (178). Also, since domestic violence is often accompanied by controlling behaviour, women in abusive relationships often do not have access to money to provide for themselves and their children should they leave (179). Abusive and controlling husbands refuse to give their wives any money which might afford them certain freedoms.

In many cases it is an accepted and even expected part of marriage that men can dominate their wives and children, even with violence if they deemed it necessary. Honour killings in the Middle East and South Asia, violence against and murder of women in China and South Asia, and unreported physical and mental abuse in Japan are some of the many examples of violence against intimate partners worldwide. Also, in many social and legal contexts in the world, a wife enjoys no independent legal rights and is merely a part of the property of a man, states Scholz (177). Further, social values ensure a certain amount of submissiveness from women. In this context it may be noted that Friedrich Engels argued that the root of the word *family* is *familus* or domestic slave and the number of slaves a man owned was referred to as *familia*.

In his book 'Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction' Pramod K. Nayar points out that many writers suggest that marriage does not guarantee the safety of home or a clear identity for women. In fact many writers emphasize that marriage is detrimental to the woman's identity (except in so far as it bestows the identity of the self-sacrificing, unselfish, constantly slaving woman-of-the-house) (131). Marriage makes

unreasonable demands on the woman, and offers little in return. The woman puts up with several miseries and abuses within marriage.

It is to be noted that violence is not only physical. Domestic violence also includes sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse or neglect, verbal harassment and economic deprivation. Emotional abuse may include such things as isolating a woman from her friends and family. Shoma A. Chatterji states that 'psychological violence includes tactics designed to undermine a woman's self-confidence. This can take any form like taunts, jeers, insults, swearing, abusive language, threats of physical violence or isolation' (*Indian Women: From Darkness to Light* 23). Chaterji adds that 'this deliberate withholding of various forms of emotional support to ensure that a woman cuts off ties with her nuclear and extended parental families and friends leads to the erosion and eventually destruction of a woman's social relationships leaving her isolated and vulnerable' (24-25). Also, emotional neglect of the wife by the husband is very common in abusive relationships. Communication in marriage is often so limited that very often, the wife does not know what the husband is thinking about.

Chaterji also notes that marital violence differs from other forms of violence precisely because it does not appear suddenly between strangers, but always within the framework of a privileged relationship where the equations between the two people are not evenly balanced. This kind of relationship implies the use of power, physical strength, threat and intimidation (*Indian Women: From Darkness to Light* 25). Authors work feminist issues into their themes when they question the role of the family in controlling and oppressing women. The needs and sensibilities of the women in the family are not considered a priority, or even legitimate. Literature is concerned with outrages on an individual or the hidden violence within intimate relationships. In this essay I will show some instances of such

violence from some selected Bengali short stories. For this I am indebted to Sutapa Bhattacharya's enlightening article on 'Women and Violence in Bangla Short Stories' published in the book 'Women, Heritage and Violence' edited by Shefali Moitra.

An analysis of the story, *Dena-Paona* by Tagore reveals the suffering inflicted upon hapless girls like Nirupama (the protagonist) through the centuries. When Ramsundar Mitra arranged the marriage of his daughter Nirupama to the only son of an affluent Raybahadur, the bridegroom's family demanded ten thousand rupees in cash and plenty of gifts in dowry, and Ramsundar agreed. However, he could not arrange for so much money and a great fracas ensued at the time of the wedding. The Raybahadur refused to allow the marriage ceremony to take place till Ramsundar paid up the entire amount of dowry. A disaster was avoided when the bridegroom opposed his father and declared, "I have nothing to do with this haggling ...I have come to marry and I will marry..." (Chattopadhyay, *Galpaguchchha* 2, 43). The wedding got through rather perfunctorily in a somber mood. At the time of departure for the father-in-laws' house, a tearful Nirupama asked her father whether she would be allowed to visit her father's house. Ramsundar assured her that he would go himself to bring her. Vrinda Nabar writes in her book 'Caste As Woman' that after marriage the daughter loses her freedom to visit her father and mother as and when she wishes. Her visit to her father's house "depends upon her 'other' home being agreeable to the idea. Any privilege she enjoys on such occasions is implicitly of a temporary nature. Her allegiance is viewed as being given over to the marital home even if she is an eternal outsider there' (64).

Though Ramsundar visited his daughter often, he was treated disrespectfully in Nirupama's matrimonial house. He was treated disdainfully by not only the Raybahadur but his servants as well. Whether he got a chance to meet his daughter or not depended entirely on the wishes of the Raybahadur,

Nirupama's father-in-law. Meanwhile the in-laws kept tormenting Nirupama with ascerbic comments at every step "Mortified by the vilification of her parents, she was reduced to weeping secretly in her room as part of her daily routine." (Chattopadhyay, *Galpaguchchha* 2, 44) Her mother-in-law's resentment showed no signs of abating. The following extract from the story is indicative of the suffering inflicted upon the hapless Nirupama:

"Even her food and clothes were not taken care of properly. If some kindly neighbour pointed to any lapse, her mother-in-law would shut her up, 'That was more than enough.' In other words, if her father had paid the full price, she would have received full care. Everyone pretended as if the girl had no right in the family; she had tricked her way into it." (44.) Vrinda Nabar writes that "many of the harassment cases concerning young married women are dowry related ... It is assumed by many Indians that the bride's parental home is like the proverbial magic pitcher: it has an infinite capacity to produce more, no matter how often it is emptied. The institution of dowry, i.e. the handing over, on demand, of gifts in cash and kind by the bride's family to the bridegroom's as a pre-condition of marriage..." is accepted as a sacrosanct privilege by the in-laws (*Caste As Woman* 159). As a result the "ordeal of getting a girl married off has acquired grotesque dimensions in Indian society," (*Caste As Woman* 162.) The notorious practice of giving dowry (the marriage portion gifted to the bridegroom and his family when a girl is given in marriage) has perpetuated terrible forms of oppression on brides down the ages, writes Nabar.

Meanwhile Nirupama had grown impatient to go on a short visit to her father's house after seeing his wizened face lined with suffering and worry. Ramsundar promised to take her home. However, Tagore writes that Ramsundar "had no right: the natural right a father has on his daughter ... had been mortgaged against unpaid dowry. Even an interview with his daughter he had to beg for with abject humility, and if denied at certain times, he was not supposed to insist a second time." (Chattopadhyay, *Galpaguchchha* 2, 45.) When the month of

'Aswin' arrived, Ramsundar was determined to bring his daughter home and sold off his residence secretly to pay off the pending amount of dowry and bring his daughter home with dignity. But Nirupama's sense of self-respect was roused when she learnt that her father had brought the money by selling his homestead. Her protest was symbolic of the resistance against oppression on the part of the oppressed themselves, and she raised her voice of rebellion and protest:

"Niru said, 'Baba, if you ever give a single paisa to my father-in-law, you shall not see me any more...' "Chattopadhyay, *Galpaguchchha* 2, 47).

"...Do you think your daughter has no dignity? ...Please do not insult me by giving them this money. Besides my husband never wanted it.' " (48).

"Ramsundar argued, 'In that case they won't permit you to go, my child,' ... Niru replied 'If they don't ...You won't insist any more, either.' " (48).

After this meeting with his daughter, Ramsundar returned home "like a thief averting the notice of everyone." (48).

But the fact that Ramsundar had brought the money, and forbidden by his daughter, had gone away without giving it to Niru's father-in-law, didn't remain a secret. When Niru's mother-in-law was informed about the matter by an eavesdropping maid servant there was no end to her wrath. Tagore writes, "For Nirupama, her father-in-law's house grew into a bed of nails... lest she should pick up meanness from corrupt company, recently Niru's meetings with relatives from her father's house had been completely banned." 48). About this time Niru became seriously ill, owing to deliberate negligence on the part of her mother-in-law. During winter she had no warm woollens to ward off the winter chill, nor was she provided with regular nourishment as the maid servants often forgot to bring her meals. Nirupama did not take the trouble to ask for anything as the idea that she was living on the charity of menials and masters of that family had taken firm roots in her mind. Her

mother-in-law, noticing this negligence on Niru's part about taking her meals, tauntingly said, "Isn't she from a nawab's family? How can she eat our poor food?" (49).

Eventually Nirupama became seriously ill owing to the continual neglect and maltreatment that she received at the hand of her in-laws. When her illness turned serious, the mother-in-law cruelly remarked, "It's all pretence" (49). At last a dying Niru said humbly to her mother-in-law that she wished to see her father and brothers once. Her unsympathetic mother-in-law caustically commented that, "she never lacks pretexts for going to her father's house." (49). The truth was that after her marriage Nirupama had never been permitted by her cruel in-laws to go to her father's house even once. Tagore writes that, "the evening she (Nirupama) went into her last gasps was when the doctor examined her for the first time, and that was his last visit as well." (49). This statement reveals the cruelty, horrifying maltreatment and appalling neglect that Nirupama suffered at the hands of her in-laws. Society encouraged, indulged in, and perpetuated this cruel practice of dowry that claimed numerous helpless and innocent victims like Nirupama. This was evident when shortly after Niru's death, another bride was fixed up for the husband of the dead girl. The mother wrote to her son about his impending second marriage, "Baba, we have fixed up another girl for you, so please come urgently..." (49). The second marriage would fetch a dowry of twenty thousand rupees and that too in cash.

The dowry system with its ugly offshoots handed down from a feudalistic past so deeply troubled Tagore's mind that in another short story called *Haimanti* (the story is named after the tortured daughter-in-law of the tale) he attacked the system of dowry strongly. Haimanti's husband was a spineless and weak kneed young man who did not resist his parent's wrong doings. So Haimanti compensated for her father's lack of wealth with her own life. Haimanti's husband was a picture of weakness,

cowardice and a gawky inactivity. His inaction and retreat even against strong provocations led to the ruin of personal happiness and conjugal propriety, resulting in death and tragedy. Haimanti's husband failed to stand up to the obduracy of his father as he refused to send her home with her father. When his father-in-law was humiliated by his father and Haimanti's mind was turned into stone, the husband attempted a feeble salvage operation, pleading with his father to permit him to take Haimanti to her father's house. But his father's roar of objection threw cold water on his last ditch attempt at salvaging the situation.

In Tagore's short story titled *Maanbhanjan*, an indifferent husband's careless non-interest and lack of rapport with his beautiful young wife Giribala leads to her loneliness and suffering, and finally spells doom for the marriage. Gopinath was indifferent to the burgeoning youth and overwhelming beauty of his wife (Giribala). He neglected all duties and obligations towards her and showered his attention elsewhere. "The woman to whom Gopinath was enslaved was Labanya ... a theatre artiste..." (Chattopadhyay, *Galpaguchha* 2, 139). One night when her husband came home and asked for the keys to the safe, Giribala refused to oblige and requested him to stay with her that night instead. An impatient and furious Gopinath wrested away her ornaments after failing to find the keys, kicked her aside and went away. Tagore writes: "if screams of the heart could be heard outside, the moonlit... night sleeping happily would have been suddenly torn asunder by a sudden and most intense cry of agony. Such heart-breaking events happen in such a completely silent way!" (144). The neglected, humiliated and abandoned Giribala had only wanted love and respect from her unfaithful husband. Instead, he forcefully snatched her ornaments, kicked her and left her for Labanya.

Sutapa Bhattacharya states that the most terrifying of all actions of violence has been depicted in Tagore's short story *Sasti*

(49). Tagore relates how Dukhiram struck his wife Radha's head and killed her instantly in a fit of blinding rage because she had not cooked food for him. Dukhiram's brother Chidam very easily transferred the blame on to his wife Chandara. He justified this by stating that if a wife goes another can be brought, but if a brother is hanged he is gone forever. Bhattacharya states that Dukhiram's wife died of a lethal blow struck by her husband and his brother Chidam's wife Chandara died of the crushing blow to her mind caused by Chidam's heart breaking words. Her husband becomes a demon – husband to her. Her body and mind gradually shriveled up and she tried to get out of the clutches of her demon – husband by embracing the death sentence (50).

S. Bhattacharya also mentions instances of sexual violence on women depicted in the short stories of the writer Jagadish Gupta. In the story *Chandrasurya Jatodin* the wife is raped by her husband and loses her sanity. The writer says of the rapist that the God realises in full the offering that is due to him. The wife's impression of the husband is depicted through the description where she feels disgust at the thought of going to bed with her husband. She feels that her husband is an ugly and lustful lump of flesh that seems to gape at her hungrily (51-52).

In another story by Gupta titled *Kalankito Samparka* the wife Makhan resists the husband's attempt to rape her but is beaten up by her husband Satu and her mother-in-law and turned out of the house at night (52). The tyrannical mother in law is a woman herself but she works hand in hand with male power in a patriarchal society, states Bhattacharya (52). What is significant is that Makhan resists her husband's unwanted advances, her shriveled and rigid form pushing with all its might as he comes closer, touching Makhan, his touch stinging her like poison. Her husband is unable to comprehend this mute protest. Makhan raises her hands and this gesture strikes Satu as extra ordinary. Makhan while defending herself had managed to strike terror in

him. Satu is frightened and runs away from Makhan to seek shelter in his mother's company (52-53).

Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay has also depicted domestic violence in some of his short stories as illustrated by S. Bhattacharya (50-51). In the short story *Mouriphul* Susheela labours all day for her family and expects a little love and sympathy from her husband and his family. She is denied this and rebels. This results in a severe thrashing from her husband which leads to her death. In the story *Umarani*, Uma dies because of her husband's indifference and lack of medical treatment. In *Durmati*, the protagonist Bina dies of hurt at the betrayal by her husband who robs her of her jewellery or *stridhan* which was at one time the only economic security of women. In *Bauchandir Math* Bibhutibhushan gives a frightening suggestion of sexual violence when he tells the story of the child bride of a thrice married man who is forced to go and live with her husband. The little girl is not to be found the next morning.

Marriage and its rituals are often restrictive and oppressive, and never just or fair towards women, as is evident from the instances discussed in this essay. The marital state becomes a site of violence and oppression in the works analysed in this article.

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