



EXPLORING THE FORCES OF WOMEN SUBJUGATION IN THE MOVIE *PARCHED*

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ABSTRACT

Women in most settled societies have experienced unequal status, exploitation and oppression on account of their gender. Leena Yadav in her film *Parched* has explored the underlying reasons for the secondary treatment of women and the varied paths towards empowerment through the characterization of four women Rani, Lajjo, Bijli and Janaki belonging to a conservative society in rural Rajasthan. The paper examines how patriarchy, traditional values and lack of education affect the lives of women in the movie leading to their suppression. It also analyses the commodification of women's bodies, the role of marriage in women subjugation and the impact of motherhood as a repressive force. The role of language in reinforcing gender inequality is discussed too. It sheds light on the importance of female companionship and empowerment of women to break away from the shackles of patriarchy. Essentially the paper is an attempt to identify and address the forces that perpetuate women subjugation in society.

Key words – Feminism, women subjugation, patriarchy

“A gender – equal society would be one where the word ‘gender’ does not exist: where everyone can be themselves.”

- Gloria Steinem

Gender is the social, behavioral and psychological aspects of being a man, woman or other gender identity. The society has made certain rules, morality and modes of conduct for each gender to follow and has been traditionally transferred through culture. Throughout history, the world had been predominantly patriarchal which

in turn posits the status of women as the second sex. They are made subordinate to male authority. The Indian women has been living in the male – dominant, patriarchal, traditional, religious, caste and class ridden society.

Cinema the most popular mass media of the century is the mirror of a society which portrays it's social, cultural and political traditions. Apart from showcasing the problems in society, it also has the ability to resolve them and bring about transformations by projecting the voices of those that matter. From time immemorial women have been treated in society as the weaker sex. This attitude is reflected in the main stream art and literature including cinema. Though earlier films hailed the secondary treatment of women as the right way of living and social organization, some of the contemporary film makers expose the reality to bring about alterations in the status of women. Leena Yadav's film "Parched" is one such attempt to uplift the position of women by poignantly portraying the hardships and inequalities meted out to village women in a patriarchal society.

The film *Parched* written and directed by Leena Yadav is her first international feature film which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival, 2015. The film is a soul stirring rendition of the subjugated village women in India.

The story is set in a desert village of Rajasthan plagued with age old ideals, traditions and customs rooted in male supremacy. The plot revolves around four women Rani, Lajjo, Bijli and Janaki belonging to different status in society and their struggles towards empowerment. Rani is a widow and the sole breadwinner of her family comprising of her son Gulab and mother in law. Lajjo is in an abusive marriage with Manoj who tortures her emotionally and physically as she couldn't bear a child. Bijli is an erotic dancer and sex worker in a travelling entertainment company. Janaki is a fifteen year old girl who is married to Gulab. She was forced into the marriage by her parents while she wanted to study. She even chops off her hair to stop marriage. Nevertheless she got married to Gulab and become the outlet of his wrath.

The movie opens with Rani and Lajjo visiting another village to fix marriage of Rani's seventeen year old son Gulab to Janaki. Rani offers a hefty sum of three lakhs rupees as dowry in exchange for Janaki. Meanwhile Gulab and his gang of friends insult an educated woman for her progressive lifestyle until her husband Kishan intervenes and warns them.

Later at the village meeting, the issue of Champa is discussed. She ran away from her in laws house to stay with her parents owing to the physical assault and repeated rapes by her father in law and brother in law. But

the elders in the village forces her to go back. The attempts of Kishan and his wife to stop this was also thwarted by the people.

Later Lajjo is showed being beaten to pulp by her husband Manoj on account of her infertility. Meanwhile many men in the village are shown visiting Bijili. But she had been turning down these offers which irks her boss.

Later during a conversation with Bijili, Lajjo realizes that her husband could be the infertile one. This compels her to have sex with Bijli's lover and becomes pregnant. Meanwhile Gulab steals Rani's money in order to pay some goons. Being fed up with Gulab's torture over Janaki, Rani throws him out of their house. Later she sells her house and give the money to Janaki for her studies and let her go with the boy who loves her.

On the eve of Dusshera festival, Lajjo informs her husband about her pregnancy. Manoj who has known all this while about his infertility accuses her of infidelity and starts beating her. While Rani was trying to help Lajjo, Manoj accidentally catches fire from the stove. The two women immediately leaves from there and goes to Bijili who has been injured in a rough group sex. The three women finally leaves the places leaving behind every thing to a new beginning.

Family, the smallest sociological unit is considered as the primary power structure which is often oppressing to women. Father is considered as the head of the family which automatically places mother at a lower position. Father is the decision making authority. In the film, marrying off their daughter to Gulab was her father's decision while she remained mum the whole time. Gulab who considers himself superior by virtue of being a male challenges Rani when she threw him out of their house. According to him a family can't survive without a man even though Rani has been the bread winner of the family all along.

Marriage is another social institution which results in women oppression. The institution of marriage is often treated by female writers as an enclosure limiting and circumscribing their lives. The images of women controlled by marriage are those of suffocation, dwarfing and mental illness.

Indian tradition or culture gives utmost importance to marriage. From their birth itself, women are continuously presented in a way befitting their role as a wife or mother. In *Manusmriti*, women are portrayed as depended beings who need to be protected by men all their life.

Pita raksati kaumare bhartha raksati

Yauvane

Raksanti sthavire Putra na stri

Svatantryamarhati (Manusmriti in the commentary of Medhatithi)

Marriage is an exchange of women from father to husband. According to Levi- Strauss' theory of kinship structures as a system of the exchange of women, women are not subordinate because of the act of exchange, but because of the modes of exchange attached to these models. This implies that women are treated as property. The masculine norm presented and cultivated in tradition considers the existence of women as depended on the male-governed male- defined social structures treating them as a piece of property to be passed from one man to another. This image denies women's personhood.

In the movie, marriage is the primary cause of misfortune for most women characters. Janaki, the child wife of Gulab suffers physical, mental, verbal and sexual abuse at the hands of Gulab. On their wedding night itself Gulab rapes her in an attempt to dominate her sexually without knowing her needs or satisfaction. He in fact considers his act a duty of a man or husband. The treatment of Janaki by Gulab intersects with that of Rani and her husband which indicates how similar the experiences of women in marriage has been through generations. Marital rape and domestic violence is not a phenomenon of yesterday or today. But it was normalized by the male dominated society as the husband's right through ages.

The situation of Champa is even worse. Her husband who has a mistress in the neighbor village has no interest in her. She has been treated as a sexual object by her father-in-law and brother-in-law who repeatedly rapes and assaults her. Even after voicing her concerns, she was forced to go back to her in laws house by the village head Kheema because according to Indian tradition, after marriage women can't leave their husband's house. Kheema says, " After marriage, your parents' home is not yours. Go to your husband. Go back before you bring shame to our village." The village leaders who are all men mercilessly suppress her and her mother's voices. Kishan is the only one who tried to stop this act by mentioning the story of Ganga who went through similar situations and committed suicide. This renders a universal appeal in the experiences of women.

In the movie marriage is treated more like an exchange of commodity than a relationship. In the first scene itself Rani and Lajjo are visiting Janaki to see her and finalize the dowry after judging her beauty. There is even a bargaining going on about the amount between Janaki 's father and Rani. The issue of dowry is depicted clearly in the movie. The practice of dowry indirectly results in the commodification of women as part of marriage. Gulab

has been seen telling her mother, “Is she any good? Worth the money? Did they reduce the dowry? I want a refund if she is rubbish.” Gulab’s friends also advises him, “Your wife better have big boobs or get a refund”. They represent typical patriarchal society who deems women as a lifeless commodity while denying their autonomy and personhood. Dowry is also a reason why girl children are viewed as a burden to family. This sentiment is evident in Tulsi’s dialogue, “ God sent one daughter after the other. Four more to marry off. One less to worry about.”

Another repressive force being dealt with in the movie is motherhood. Indian culture has long glorified the role of woman as a mother. The identity of motherhood overshadowed all other identities of Indian women. Motherhood and reproduction has been the core of the feminist discourse about women’s rights ever since it’s onset. Feminism and motherhood have a complicated relationship. Radical feminist Shulamith Firestone articulated that women would never truly be free of patriarchy until they were freed from the yoke of reproduction. In contrast, Adrienne Rich argued that it was the patriarchal notions of motherhood, not the actual experience of mothering, that was the source of women's oppression.

In the movie, we can see how motherhood becomes a crisis in the lives of women, especially Lajjo. Lajjo is unable to conceive a child and is constantly subjected to abuse and ridicule by her husband and society. She has been called a “barren witch” by her husband Manoj. The societal expectation of motherhood perpetuates the notion that a woman’s worth is tied to her ability to bear children, and those who are unable to do so are deemed inferior and face discrimination and abuse.

Rani at a point comments, “ But she must bear children. Without bearing a child, a woman’s life is nothing”. Here Rani acts as a representative of the women folk who are highly rooted in patriarchal ideals. She is a victim of the age old domination of patriarchy who unconsciously imbibed the subaltern position of women. But Bijli corrects her immediately by saying, “ A woman has value even without a child. We weren’t born just to bear children”. It was Bijli who first introduces the possibility that Manoj can be the infertile one too. It is ironic to note that the patriarchal society never points their fingers on men of their infertility, only the women are thrown stones at.

The movie also sheds light on the lack of education and empowerment among women in rural India This is seen in the limited opportunities available to the female characters in the movie, as well as their inability to

make decisions for themselves. The female characters in the movie are shown being denied access to education, thereby limiting their knowledge and ability to make informed decision and assert their rights.

The disparity between educated women and uneducated ones are shown using the portrayal of Naobi. She is the only educated woman in the village who is confident, self reliant and leads a successful married life with Kishan. Her life is being contrasted with other women who leads a life of suffering and torture. The men in the village can be seen trying to mock and demean Naobi owing to her education. For instance the village head Kheema comments, “ Do not flaunt your education here”. In another occasion, Janaki was advised, “ Girls who read make bad wives” . This reinforces the notion that women’s primary duty is in the domestic sphere and they are not capable of participating in public life.

From the experiences of all these women characters, it is evident that patriarchy is the root cause of all their sufferings. Patriarchy is a social system that perpetuates male dominance and reinforces the idea that men are superior to women. The movie vividly depicts how patriarchal norms and values perpetuate gender inequality and result in the subjugation of women.

The male characters in the movie are portrayed as primary beneficiaries of patriarchal system. They hold positions of power and authority and are seen as the primary decision makers in their families and communities. For instance, the village meeting where there was no female representative among the village heads exemplifies this statement. The female characters, on the other hand are shown as being oppressed and marginalized due to their gender.

The movie also highlights the way in which patriarchal norms and values are internalized by women themselves. This is evident in the character of Rani, who believes that her husband’s abuse is a result of her own shortcomings and that she must somehow change herself in order to be accepted by him.

The role of language in perpetuating subjugation of women is also explored in the movie. The language used by the male characters is often demeaning and derogatory, especially in their conversations about women very vulgar terms are used which objectifies women and puts them in a subservient position. The movie also highlights how language is used as a tool of control and dominance by male characters.

However the women in the movie tries to use language as a means of resistance and empowerment. At one point Bijli realises how the male dominated society has created language in favour of them by degrading women. She

even challenges those derogatory terms and creates new ones in favour of women. Bijli comments, “ Who invented these cuss words! I bet it was a man. Every time they keep insulting women”.

The movie outlines a complex web of forces that are deeply entrenched in the social, cultural and economic framework of the society which contribute to women subjugation in Indian society. But Leena Yadav was successful in ending the film on a positive note by celebrating the divine power of the feminine. On the festival of Dusshera, where goddess Durga decimates the great demon Mahisur is symbolic of women annihilating the shackles of patriarchy. The movie ends with the three women Bijli, Rani and Lajjo at a crossroad wondering where to go and finally letting only their heart to choose which road to take.

CONCLUSION

Leena Yadav directorial *Parched* is a movie which portrayed the life of village women in a gender laden Indian society. The movie tells the tale of four women from four different status in life who resides in the desert village of Rajasthan, infected by social evils like superstition and practices of patriarchy. This paper tried to analyse the different forces or agencies of women subjugation that is operating within the course of the movie. The major oppressive forces being discussed are namely family, marriage, motherhood, domestic violence, dowry, lack of education and empowerment, language and patriarchal norms and values. Patriarchy was identified as the root cause of all injustices meted out to the women characters. By empowering the women characters towards the end of the movie, Leena Yadav reinforces the notion that women can be liberated from the clutches of patriarchy only when they are willing to do so.

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