

Objectification of Women during Conflict: a Human Rights Perspective

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Abstract

Review Article

As it is known to us about the persisting patriarchal domination on women over ages, the objectification of women during conflicting situation as a part of the patriarchal domination can be sensed from time immemorial. During conflicts, by creating the myths of womanhood, women were used as symbol of national, group or ethnic identity where women's sexuality is objectified and seen as an object to be protected by the men of that nation, community or group against the "Other" i.e from the male of the enemy nation, group or community. Women were used as weapons of war in conflict, when conflict subsided women lacked protection and justice and when conflict ended, women's hopes for improved rights met with distress and denied. It has been already a patriarchal norm that men are protectors and women needed to be protected. The same phenomena operated during conflict time where men were asked to sacrifice themselves for the safety and honour of women as weaker sex and the symbolic honour paid to 'Mother Earth'. May be it a national freedom movement, Inter-ethnic war, or national war, women's body has been the main object of abuse to terrorize both men and women. Women's body has been as a trophy of war, to celebrate victories and masculinity. Within this context, in this paper an endeavor is made to analyze theoretically the patriarchal construct of women's body and its objectification during conflict situation from a human rights perspective.

Keywords: Human Rights Perspective.

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Social Construct Of Women's Bodies

From a feminist perspective, the human body is a social construction which is shaped and controlled by the norms and expectations of gendered social orders, based on the racial, class, religious, based gendered socializations. For example, the myth of standardizing white, toned, slim bodies of women and stigmatizing fat people, disrespecting old people, making people with disabilities invisible, and assuming that everyone is heterosexual. The society through social conditioning indoctrinate certain gendered attributes, which we call "manliness" or "masculinity" and "womanliness" or "femininity," into the brains of male and female as identified through the visible differences in their respective genitalia. The attributes are designed to fit people into the gendered construct of social roles, such as "mother," "father," etc. Women's inferiority status was first theorized by the Greek philosopher Plato in his book *The Republic*. He believed that in order to live a better life, both the individual (man) and the state must control nature with culture or reason. Plato identified culture as the "master" and associated it with rationality, freedom which enables man to surpass nature. Women on the other hand are related with nature possessing the

biological functions (reproduction, nurture, menstruation) that men do not, tend to be biologically deficient (Castrated man or deficient male) void of reason and brain making women incapable of being a part of the ruling group.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her *Second Sex*, 1949, opined that the idea of the feminine is a masculine myth; being the second sex needs to be radically challenged and transformed philosophically and ethically. She asserts 'One is not born, but rather one becomes a woman'. The 'eternal feminine' according to her is a myth which has been reinforced by women themselves. The feminine is a passive and patriarchal myth invented for women to maintain their place as the 'Other' in society. Beauvoir laid down a historical analysis showing how women were constructed as "Other" historically. Owing to the biological differences between, men and women the concept of Man-the Hunter and Women the Gatherer were formed. Man's tasks of hunting led to the conflict, rivalry for survival among man which culminated into the growth of civilizations. Women's role in the early times, were determined by child-bearing and motherhood. Thus women's tasks were given less weight-age in

comparison to the male's active, rational and external principle of surviving strategies creating civilization or forming cultures. As women's work complemented the male psyche and man enjoyed a non-threatening companionship there was no motivation for resolution or synthesis of the patriarchal society. Thus, from that phase gradually women experienced of becoming the "Other". The patriarchal society then established the notion "man-the protector" to protect women as she is passive as nature and man has authority over nature and women.

Thus women and men's bodies, sexualities, and gender identities needs to be deconstructed in order to understand how these bodies becomes the sites where cultural notions of customariness and social decency are contested. Though bodies are termed as apolitical entity, it invests in real sense the center of the political order as bodies are the marker of difference, status, power which gets reflected in economic, political, social and legal apparatus of a given society. The female and male bodies are so constructed by the society that one body can exhibit power, privilege and dominance over the other body (female). Issues, policies, laws related to intimate relationships, reproductive rights, gender based violence, job segregation, technologies everything centers on the construction of body. With the growing awareness the importance of body and how it has been constructed, the radical feminists for the first time used the term "body politics" in 1970s against the objectification of female body with the slogan "personal is the political" to claim women's right over her own body.

Masculinity stereotypes and its impacts on Gendered body:

Gender and gender stereotypes are associated with self-identity and sexual practices based on that self-identity. Both feminine and masculine stereotypes are based on the idea of opposites which belongs together to form the whole. For example: Marriage mainly heterosexual. But this accepted opposites are not placed in equal positions but are hierarchically situated which resulted into amplification of the real physical and psychological variation between the sexes. Moreover the associated gender stereotypes are not inclusive of the diversity of genders in human population, i.e. exclusion of LGBT etc... Gender stereotypes are no doubt intrinsically political and are used to perpetuate and manipulate unequal power relations between men and women. They are enforced by manufacturing consent through the process of gendering. As per the discourse of the Post-Modern feminism, Julia Kristeva, Lucy Irigaray tend to analyse the patriarchal gender order as the phallo-centric symbolic order where masculinities are more welcomed in the Order and femininity feels excluded but are forced to fit into it. However, masculinities itself is not a homogenous concept and effects men differently. Traditional masculinity is called the hegemonic

masculinity which is most celebrated characterized by power/strength, rationality, heterosexuality, risk-taking, dominance, leadership, control, and repression of emotions. As gendered bodies are constructed, reconstructed and performed to preserve the phallo-centric order, the construction of masculine identities by men can be said to be a conscious endeavour to maintain their supremacy within the gender hierarchy. Masculinity and its impact on men, women as well as the "Others" needed to be researched as all gender identities are affected by the hegemonic masculinity. Men who cannot exhibit the traits of hegemonic masculinity are often oppressed and rebuked as effeminate man. Thus amidst traditional masculinity framework, achieving gender equality seemed to be bleak as traditional masculinity would try to defend against change. This defend against change can be seen in our patriarchal legal framework, operationalization of digital India, proliferation in media and its gender portrayal etc.

Construction of gender in nationalist discourse

Thus woman's body is a social construct which is often linked with nature, earth finally with nation. The patriarchal society has tended to link the constructed femininity with the characteristics of nation and nature. The link between nature and women is theorized on the basis of similarities based on biological functions and pro-creation function of women and the natural bounty laid down by nature for human survival. As discussed earlier, patriarchy has always created binary opposites where they glorified mind over the body. As women are emotional, caring, they lacked wisdom and can be controlled by man who are wise as man can control nature. Within this context, often a nation is being symbolized as feminine, which needs protection from the sons of the soil. This led to the construction of the myth of Mother India and the simultaneous idealization of Indian womanhood resulted in the construction of gendered nationhood. Women took active part in the national struggles for liberation in India, but it did not culminated to transformation of equal social status at par with man after independence. During the nationalist movement as well they contributed equally within and outside home in activities like spinning and weaving cloths, providing food and shelter for the soldiers of independence at home and took active part in political rallies, acted as messengers, extremist groups etc outside home. In spite of the traditional conservative social structure, by creating the myth of ideal Indian womanhood based on Hindu mythology intensifying the use of mythical figures of *Sita* and *Savitri*, the nationalist leaders manufactured the consent of Indian men and women to suit the changing requirements of the nationalist movement and its leaders. The woman was supposed to be the guardian of the 'spiritual' domain which needed to be protected from the materialistic domains of the colonial rulers [1]. For the purpose femininity was

constructed in such a way without threatening the masculinity virtues. Women were viewed as the better half of men i.e. *Ardhangini* (complementary half) and *Sahadharmini* (helpmate), which invited self-sacrifice for the cause of the nation. At the same time the nation was visualized as the “mother”, “Bharat Mata, Dharti Maa” which required protection from masculine power from encroachment of its chastity in the hand of the “Other” the enemy nation or in the hands of man from other nation. The imagery of nation-as-mother and motherland evokes even more passionate responses. The symbolic appropriation of woman as mother into the nation-state carries immense emotional investment. Women's primary entry point into the nation-state is as mothers, as producers of strong, brave sons ready to fight to death for the sacred land. It has been argued that "family plays such a central role in the nation's public imaginings that motherhood could be viewed as a national service [2]."

Women used as a trophy of War

The understanding of the relationship between the notion of sex and gender is very crucial to understand the relationship between the objectification of women during conflict. During conflict Women's body serves as a site for dichotomous relationship between gender and nation, private and public, and bondage and power. Conflict may be insurgency, nationalist struggle, ethnic conflicts etc is always centered on power and territory where the land or territory signifies both a symbol of the traditionally masculine, public realm of nationhood as well as the traditionally feminine, private realm of female sexuality. Throughout Indian history there are lots of examples of objectification of women at times of war/conflict. In the early part of this article, elaborated the use of women during nationalist struggle by symbolizing the *Sita-Savitri* models. The History has also witnessed that during Ahom rule, the kings used women as objects, Princess of nearby kingdoms were presented to the Ahom kings as tax or as a reward by the defeated king of the nearby states [3].

During conflict, it becomes pertinent to safeguard the inner spiritual self, culture, tradition from external encroachment. The home represents the internal domain where women are regarded as its custodian. To overthrow anything alien is to protect the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence, allowing no encroachments into this arena [4]. During conflict, women's bodies are controlled, closely watched, protected as the patriarchal hold over femininity were now clearly marked-in her dress, her eating habits, her social conduct, her religiosity. Thus the new patriarchy of nationalism gave women "a new social responsibility" not to imitate men, but “to maintain the cohesiveness of family life and solidarity with the kin group to which men could not now devote much attention [5]”. Women are always treated as the symbol of culture, tradition and home both by the man

of one's own nation and also by the man of the enemy nation. Thus during conflict situations, women's human rights are violated by aggravating the objectification of women which culminates into the rape of women. Rape of women is a symbolic representation of failure of masculine power to protect the honour of the nation from the encroachment of the other nation's man. Thus the rape of women becomes a matter of national shame and cultural/religious dishonour which needed to be avenged. There are different kinds of gender dimensions during the pre-conflict, conflict and post – conflict situation. During the pre-conflict situation, there are increased mobilization of soldiers or army which leads to increase sexual harassment and loss of privacy even within the four walls of the house (which is considered so-called safe zone) due to frequent checks and sexual abuse. During conflict situation, women face psychological trauma, physical violence, causalities and death. After the conflict situation, in the reconstruction and rehabilitation policies of government, women are often excluded from formal discussions. In every conflict the intrinsic patriarchy of man suppress women by the use of sexual violation as a means of dishonouring the community. Cases like these are more often suppressed and hidden due to the patriarchal notion of societal taboos and morality that backs the incidents on the victim. Consequently such cases become difficult to intervene as well as document as these would make the victim re-live those traumatic moments again. Thus mental health problem including psychological trauma afflicts women gravely and lead to dire health consequences.

Objectification of women and violations of human rights

A major source of war is the socialization of men to be aggressive and concerned about appearing strong in the sense of being ready to fight and kill [6]! It is mostly debated that the construction of masculinity is linked with violence as egotistical, aggressive and dominant behaviours are common features of cultural definitions associated with masculinity [7]. Gendered discrimination is an expression of a social order based on inequality, a result of the assignment of different roles to women and men on the grounds of their sex and differential recognition of the male role as superior. It is a manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women which have led to the domination over women by men and to the prevention of women's full advancement. The prevailing social structure has assigned a low status to women. Women due to the gendered socialization are not allowed to participate in the decision making process and remained as silent spectators and silent victims to the discriminations. The overall discriminating status of women clearly implicates the double vulnerability of women towards human rights violence during conflict. War or conflict as already recognized as a masculinity attribute is also an important mechanism for enhancing masculinity. The

most important task of maintaining masculinity and way of waging conflict is to create fear psychosis in the minds of the “Other”. Thus rape of women is identified by patriarchy as standards of male behaviour and trophy of masculinity in order to threaten the masculinity of the enemy. During conflict men of the warring communities are licensed to rape as they are licensed to kill.

The security debates often center around the state-centric paradigm which views security as grounded in the public-private binary which leads to gendered insecurities [8]. The idea of territory, ethnic community, nation etc is often grounded in the idea of masculinist protection, where women have always been assigned the private space as a category to be protected from “Other”. Moreover, it is often assumed that in the private sphere, there is a male guardian to protect the bodies of women from any public encroachment. Thus the private world is often treated as passive and objectified where, the sphere of agency and subjectivity is associated with the public world.

At present, the question is regarding the safeguard of “Other Women” that represents the rival group/nation. Interestingly, the patriarchs who represent the nation are identified with the warrior hero assumed to be self-sacrificing having chivalrous masculine power but rarely accused of displaying aggressive masculinity [9]. Here the dichotomy lies between the chivalrous masculinity and its implication to the objectified women in conflict. Due to the objectification of women’s bodies, women are viewed as a category to be protected before-during-after conflict. Protection of women symbolizes the purity of nation at the time of conflict. Thus raping women symbolizes the violation of man’s property and the purity of nation [10]. The objectification of women as protected and of man as protector hence has made the position of protected women as one of gratitude for protection she is granted by the patriarchs of the nation from the patriarchs of the enemy is itself self-demoralizing, violating the human rights of women.

From the above discussion, it is conceptualized that ¹Women’s human rights are violated at the time of conflict by:

- Seizing Women’s Control over their own bodies,
- Objectification of Women during Conflict,
- Violating Women’s dignity and identity by raping and sexual humiliation in the name of conflict,
- by reducing the role of women during conflict as passive and as living beings under charity showed by the patriarchs of the nation by protecting them
- Lastly, by glorifying, naturalizing the rapists as chivalrous masculine power who humiliates women’s dignity.

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