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The Implications of Violence on the Gender Variant People in Indian Visual Media: An Expository Analysis

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Abstract:

Violence refers to behaviour that perpetrates cruelty/brutality on any individual. Generally, people belonging to marginalized communities, women, and gender non-conforming are susceptible to violence because of their vulnerability. People with different sexual identities face backlash, including eviction, banishment, disownment, disinheritance, ostracization, physical harm/injury threats, and even confinement in their homes because of their gender and sexual orientation. In her book *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriages in Modern India* (2021), Ruth Vanita cites instances of same-sex couples committing suicide because of familial violence and their inability to live apart from each other. Same sex couples face violence that includes beatings, confinement at home, disinheritance and disownment, forced marriages, stigmatization and social hostility among others. It is indeed violence that drives people with different sexual identities to lead clandestine lives or commit suicide. Despite the Supreme Court of India decriminalizing same-sex relationships in 2018, violence and stigma against people with different sexual identities continue unabated. This paper focuses on the depiction of violence against gender non-conforming people in Indian movies through the literary frameworks of identity, cultural and gender perspectives.

Keywords: Violence, vulnerability, social hostility, cultural and gender perspectives.

Introduction

The term “violence” points to the inhuman behaviour perpetrated on an individual. People who live on the margins/fringes of society generally face physical and non-physical

violence including ghettoization, ostracization and extermination from a community. They invariably become victims of violence and face reprisals, are disowned from their family members and face physical attacks because of their sexual orientation. People with different sexual identities also run the risk of being caught in a vortex of physical, social and familial violence because of their sexual identity. They are either pressured to get into a conventional marriage or shunned by kith and kin when they refuse to do so. Various newspaper reports often highlight how LGBTQA people are killed because of society's reluctance to accept non-normative behaviour. A normative behaviour/sexuality is considered acceptable, while non-normative sexuality is castigated and frowned upon.

Gender and Sexuality

While gender refers to socially attributed roles assigned to men and women, sexuality refers to a person's sexual inclination towards another person. The inclination may be towards the same sex or towards the opposite sex. As Judith Butler rightly points out, gender is a social construct that demarcates male and female categories. Ruth Vanita in *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriages in Modern India* (2021) cites examples from Indian mythology to drive home the point that gender is unreal, and that the self is within a man and a woman; the true self is neither male nor female. While an individual's physical and mental identity tends to change, the self does not change. Ruth Vanita poses a question in the course of the book: if gender is unreal, why should a person marry only a person of the opposite gender.

According to Judith Butler, Gender is entirely a constructed one that is always open to challenge. "We are assigned a sex at birth and then a slew of expectations follow which continue to assign gender to us" (*Gender Trouble*, 2006) and we all perform roles, including the socially constructed role of our gender. She also further points out that a person's "gender identity is established through behaviour, and there is a possibility to construct different genders via different behaviours." ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", 1988) Butler contends that there should be no link between one's sex and one's gender so that "...gender and desire can be flexible, free-floating and not caused by other stable factors." (*Gender Trouble*, 2006) Gender is thus "... not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is thus, a construction, that regularly conceals its genesis..." (*Gender Trouble*, 2006) and is irrelevant in the attraction between two persons.

Gender and Identity

The word "Queer" means anything deviant or anything that goes against the normal. Some people prefer partners of the same sex; some prefer partners of the opposite sex, while some prefer partners of both the sexes. Queer thus focuses on the mismatch/incongruence between one's biological sex and one's sexual attraction. In the words of Gabrielle Kassel (2021), "...Queer is sometimes expanded to include any non-normative sexuality, including cisgender queer heterosexuality...." As the very name suggests, Queer Theory analyses sexual identities that go against the societal norms of sexuality. This theory emphasizes that the terms "male and female" are socially constructed ones and that standards of morality do not judge sexuality. The queer theory views the "... construction of sexual identities around the hierarchically structured binary opposition of homo/heterosexual as inherently unstable" (Roseneil Sasha, 2000) thereby pointing to the fluid nature of the formation of identities.

Sexuality is not a problem of fantasy; it is a problem of verbalization....discourse on sexuality is the relationship between "what we do, what we are obliged to do, what we are allowed to do, what we are forbidden to do in the field of sexuality, what we are allowed, forbidden or obliged to say about our sexual behaviour... how people live, think and speak about sexuality, what kinds of action can and cannot be done... (Michael Foucault, 1990)

As sexual identities are not fixed, there is a possibility of people having different sexual identities, and that "individual sexuality is fluid, fragmented and dynamic collectivity of possible sexualities, and it may vary at different points during one's life." (Tyson, 2006) Queer theory, like deconstruction, negates the idea that only heterosexual relationships are ideal in society "...by exposing and breaking down the traditional assumptions that sexual and gender identities are presumed to be heterosexual."(Annamarie, Jagose, 1997). Nivedita Menon, in *Seeing like a Feminist* (2012) says that people should give up the notion that only heterosexuality is normal and that human bodies are either male or female so that "... more and more kinds of bodies and desires will come into view. Perhaps also, one body may, in one lifetime, move through many identities and desires..."

Queer theorists perceive identity to be a socio-cultural construct that influences identity formation. According to William Connolly, "Identity is produced at the point of contact between essential understanding of Self and socially constructed narratives of Self." (1991). Thus, identity is all about how one understands oneself and how social definitions define a person's self. Jennifer Miller in "The Constructionist Turn in Sexuality and Gender Studies"(2020) points out that as identities are social constructs, in different times and places, different meanings and values dominate and influence identity. These meanings and values are transmitted through cultural texts like television, music or film and circulate in social institutions like schools, museums, and families. As a result, meanings and values change across space and time. Thus, sexual identity is also a varying social construct that can change from an individual to an individual.

Gender and Violence

It is not uncommon to witness violence being heaped on sexual minorities because of the societal prejudices against such people. A law enacted in post-colonial India, Anti-Sodomy Law (1861) bans/outlaws homosexual acts that are considered to be unnatural. Ruth Vanita points out that society's deeply entrenched homophobia is manifested in beatings and murders of gay people in the West, public executions in the Middle East, violence against gay people and calls to persecute them. She strongly contends that same-sex relationships do not gain traction among the communities, and how people with different sexual identities are invariably threatened, coerced and compelled to fall in line with the norms of society.

LGBTQ people are also sometimes forced to end their lives, and by doing so, these people want to make their voices heard loud and clear in society. In addition, LGBTQ people do not have the right to be together, and violence is inflicted on them when they try to marry. They face disownment and estrangement from their family members on account of their sexual identities. Ruth Vanita in her *Love Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in Modern India (2021)* cites the examples of 2 women nurses who were denounced and harassed in society for marrying each other: "Even couples who obtain family approval face other kinds of social prejudice and discrimination. Nurses Jaya Verma and Tanuja Chouhan were criticized and abused by some neighbours...They said they would not let this harassment prevent them from living together."

The violence inflicted on LGBTQ people can be physical, social or sometimes psychological, with such people experiencing feelings of depression and alienation for not being able to unite or be with their partners. Ruth Vanita succinctly expresses the problems faced by LGBTQ people in the following lines: “They are subjected to social and familial pressure to separate from their lovers and marry others, and are also often in physical fear of being injured or murdered by hostile relatives” (2021)

A report published in *The Hindu* dated 26.5.2022 points out how the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in its released document has recommended the need for framing policies to protect LGBTQ workers from social exclusion and discrimination. According to ILO, the need of the hour is the identification of concrete steps for improving the legal and policy environment, ending discrimination and exclusions of LGBTQ people. People with different sexual identities often face harassment, violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics. Hence, it is imperative to initiate programmes to remove gender-based discrimination and ensure the inclusion of LGBTQ people in the mainstream society.

Violence against LGBT people

Women who refuse to get married as per their parents’ wishes or go for same-sex marriages face violence including eviction from their homes. The agony of not being able to live with her partner is expressed by Kiran in Ruth Vanita’s book *Love Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in Modern India* when she says: “ I find darkness around me. We both had decided to live together... People here cannot understand a girl’s feeling of love and respect for another girl. Even other girls only laugh at such a feeling and consider it absurd...” (Ruth Vanita, 2021). Violence against people with different sexual identities is perpetrated when they try to assert their independent choices, and this homophobia“...is only the most visible dimension of a phobia against all non-normative sexuality.”(Ruth Vanita, 2021)

Despite the SC decriminalizing consensual same-sex relationships in 2018 violence against gender non-conforming people goes on unabated, and media reports invariably highlight how deeply societal prejudices act against LGBTQ people. Similarly, a news report published by Justin Vallejo on Jan 20, 2022 points out that bodies of 2 women from Texas who were married in 2021 were found tortured, severed and dumped in trash bags. (“Newlyweds shot,

dismembered and dumped in a plastic trash bag by the side of the road in Mexico") This points to society's extreme aversion towards people of different sexual identities and how people inflict physical violence on gender non-conforming people. Though LGBTQ people are subjected to social stigma and violence and face harassment in public places because of their sexual identity, rarely do they report/expose the violence because such reporting would invariably result in hostility and further aggravate the violence against them.

Radhika Coomaraswamy (2002), in her report on the "Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women" explains that violence against women who defy/violate the established norms on gender is particularly "acute when combined with discrimination based on sexual orientation or change of gender identity. Violence against sexual minorities is on the increase, and we must take up the challenge of what may be called the last frontier of human rights." When LGBTQ people come out to their families, the response of the family members includes "...disappointment, disapproval, shock, rejection, hostility and even violence." (Ranade, 2016) This is only an indication of the low-level acceptance of gender variant people both within families and in society.

Controlling Women's sexuality/bodies

Society generally controls women's sexuality, and stringent punishment against defiant women is always justified as "securing social, economic and cultural norms, such as: forced marriages and childbirth, "corrective rape," so-called "honor killings," or the perpetuation of beliefs that women, and particularly married women, are always available for sex – with or without their consent." (Susana Fried, 2005) Violence against LGBT people is perpetrated due to the social construct of gender and the so-called perception of normal sexuality in society. Any other sexual identity other than the established ones of either being male or female is always met with strong condemnation and results in threats of violence and physical harm to people.

Pointing out further that women with different sexual identities face harassment at the hands of family members and society at large, Susana Fried (2005) remarks: "Scores of women, especially lesbians across various countries are subjected to violence and discriminated against at work, tortured by the police and other state officials, raped by male family members, and subject to other forms of violence and inhumane treatment because of their actual and perceived sexual

orientation and gender expression.” Talking about discrimination against people based on their sexual identities, Nigel Rodley, former UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, remarks:

I believe that discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity may contribute to the process of the dehumanization of the victim, which is often a necessary condition for torture and ill-treatment to take place. Furthermore, discriminatory attitudes towards members of sexual minorities can mean that they are perceived as less credible by law enforcement agencies or not fully entitled to an equal standard of protection, including protection against violence carried out by non-state agents... Silencing through shame or the threat by law enforcement officials to publicly disclose the birth sex of the victim or his or her sexual orientation (to family members, among others) may keep a considerable number of victims from reporting abuses. (2000)

Depiction of Familial violence in *Fire*

This paper discusses how violence is perpetrated against gender non-conforming people by taking up Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* and Ligy J. Pulappally’s *Sancharram* (Malayalam movie) for analysis. *Fire* movie deals with the lives of two sister-in-laws Sita and Radha, whom their spouses domestically abuse. Their spouses' neglect, indifference, and physical and mental abuse make them enter into a relationship/turn to each other. One evening when their spouses spurn them, Radha and Sita become physically intimate with each other. Ashok is aghast at witnessing the physical closeness between Radha and Sita. Enraged, he questions Radha on her relationship with Sita and subjects her to physical abuse by slapping her. Ashok becomes even more violent when Radha bluntly tells her, "I desire Sita, I desire her warmth, her body, I desire to live with her". In the midst of the argument between Radha and Ashok, Radha's sari catches Fire, and Ashok silently watches it without dousing the Fire. Radha extinguishes the Fire and recollects the words uttered by her mother when she was young, and finally says that she can see the ocean. ("I can see the ocean, I can see it") The movie ends with an injured Radha leaving Ashok to meet Sita. Both the women meet and are in each other's company, finding warmth and happiness.

Fire depicts how both Radha and Sita are oppressed in their respective marriages and are subjected to physical violence by their husbands. They turn to each other and develop a strong bonding. Towards the end, Sita and Radha unfetter themselves from the shackles of patriarchal

subjugation and decide to carve their own independent lives. As Tanisha Das points out, the relationship between Sita and Radha is “a conscious and deliberate response against the misuse and abuse of female members by male power within the confinements of a traditional family. Thus lesbianism is invoked in the film in the context of power imbalances within the patriarchal society that could be potentially resisted through sexual intimacies without necessarily involving men...” (Tanisha Das, 2020)

Fire is an apt portrayal of the repression of female sexuality by the hegemony of patriarchy. In a society bound by patriarchal norms, women are considered mere objects to be controlled and exploited by men. During one of her conversations, Sita tells Radha that she had been taught by her mother that “A woman without a husband is like plain rice: bland and unappetizing” indicating women's weak/inferior status in society. She also further adds that society can never understand women's feelings towards each other and that “there is no word in our language that describes what we are, how we feel for each other.” Indian women rarely have the freedom to make their own choices in marriage; even after marriage, they are forced to sacrifice their desires/interests for their spouses or their families. The act of Jatin and Ashok slapping their wives Sita and Radha in *Fire* reinforces the long-held notion that men have the unbridled freedom to physically assault their wives and harass them if they try to make their own choices in their relationships.

On learning about Radha's interest toward Sita, her mother-in-law and the servant at her house, Mundu shame her for having a relationship with another “woman.” This only bears testimony to the fact that society as a whole frowns upon and cannot accept same-sex relationships. Towards the end of the movie when Radha's saree catches Fire, Ashok does not seem to be bothered either about her or her saree but instead leaves the scene with his paralyzed mother.

The movie also depicts how women are conditioned from the beginning of their childhood to accept norms and traditions without even questioning them. Gender shapes a woman's choices, desires and wishes in her life. This is exemplified in the movie *Fire* when Sita rightly says that she feels “trapped in a rigorous structure of obeying and responding to every situation that demands her attention.”(Tanisha Das, 2020) *Fire* highlights the denial of female

sexuality by patriarchy, and the lack of freedom for women to have control over their bodies. The ensuing violence/oppression resulting from coming out of their identities forces queers to lead a clandestine life. The movie shows how the continuous domestic violence and subjugation of Sita and Radha at the hands of their spouses make the protagonists unfetter themselves from the shackles of marriage and chart their own paths.

Ligy J. Pulappally's *Sancharram* (Malayalam)

The movie is about two school-going girls in Kerala, who hail from 2 different religions, and who fall for each other. Delilah and Kiran are childhood friends who are attracted to each other. The repercussions of their attraction and the reaction of their families to their attraction are dealt with in the movie. When Delilah's mother learns about her relationship with Kiran, she confines Delilah in a room, depriving her of mobility and freedom to choose. Delilah's mother inflicts physical and mental violence on her and forces her into an arranged marriage, much against Delilah's wishes.

Similarly, when Kiran's mother finds out that her daughter is in a relationship with Delilah, she reprimands her and calls her a disgrace to the family. She asks Kiran to immediately snap her relationship with Delilah, which she stubbornly refuses to do. Infuriated by Kiran's response, she asks her daughter to leave the house, and Kiran defiantly walks out of the house, much to the chagrin of her parents. The acts of Delilah's and Kiran's mother are similar to what scores of other lesbians face when their relationships are discovered. They would be beaten up, tortured, harassed or excommunicated or even killed or have to suffer physical injuries on their bodies. This point is expressed in the following lines: "... so many women are denied their right to love. Some may be locked up, or beaten up, killed, or face 'corrective' rapes, all in the name of 'honour.'" (Ishmeet, Nagpal, 2017).

Sancharram depicts the difficulty of being a lesbian in a convention and tradition-bound society, where having alternate sexuality is impossible. The movie's ending is symbolic of the flying of a butterfly in the sky. It indicates the desire of the protagonists to be independent and liberated from the shackles of rigid social norms. It also marks the beginning of their quest for freedom. The movie doesn't end with the reunion of the protagonists; rather it has an open ending with Delilah running out of the church when her wedding ceremonies are underway and

Kiran snapping her locks of hair and throwing them and walking away from the waterfall, where she decides to commit suicide initially. Everyone has the right to love a person of his/her choice, notwithstanding his/her gender and sexual orientation; sexual orientation should never come in the way of a person's love. People should be accepted for who they are and not condemned or rejected for what they choose.

Ligy J. Pulappally's movie highlights how social norms force individuals to fall in line with the established social conventions on morality. The movie tries to offer a ray of hope for people who have different sexual identities by not showing Delilah and Kiran committing suicide together. As expressed in an article in *The New Indian Express*, "Sancharram questions the rhetoric of heterosexuality as "natural" and hence legal by highlighting two aspects in the film: setting the love between the two women in a rural, Edenic environment, positing homosexuality as an equally "natural" way of love as heterosexuality, and by incorporating and displacing heterosexual love." (2012)

Conclusion

It is not an exaggeration to state that violence against LGBTQ people only alienates them and pushes them to the fringes of society. A pluralist and inclusive society is possible only when all members of society are treated equally without any discrimination based on their gender or sexual orientation. Sita, Radha, Delilah and Kiran, the protagonists of *Fire* and *Sancharram* are victims of familial violence and are forced to accept the choices imposed on their lives by social and patriarchal norms. If violence against gender non-conforming people is to be curbed, the need of the hour is to usher in an attitudinal change among people so that they can harmoniously coexist with each other in society.

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