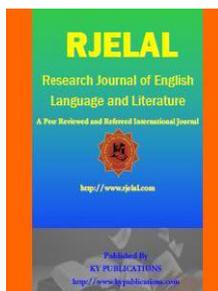




## A POST-COLONIAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPT OF VIRGINITY AND HONOUR IN THE EPIC THE *MAHABHARATA* TO DE-STIGMATIZE THE HONOUR AND HONOUR BASED CRIMES

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### ABSTRACT

A girl child when born has an indispensable stigma attached to her body and that stigma is the stigma of honour. The unit of measurement of her character is the purity of her body. And thus, every crime and violence directed against the body of a girl is somewhere associated with the stigma of honour. This honour stigma plays a key role in the objectification of women too. This paper explores how this honour stigma is the chief cause of gender based violence and gender-related crimes and how literature has been misinterpreted to support it.

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Most girls in South Asia are born with the invisible yet iron-strong shackles for virginity protection for the sake of family honour. The cloak of honour should not fall from a girl's shoulders and the men of the family have to act as the pin that holds this cloak in place. This pin should make the cloak remain at its destined place even if it hurt the shoulders and make it bleed in that attempt. Girls are considered to be the flag bearers of the family honour while the males of the house consider themselves responsible for protecting it at any cost. This remains an unspoken rule in almost every household since centuries but at the same time it has not been present since eternity. Because of this stigma, both men and women of these countries somewhere or the other feel away from their grounds and suffer a sense of bondage as when amidst the vast expansion of a sea. Thus, it is important for those who spear-head the movements

of preservation of cultural heritage to know that what they have been practicing in the name of protecting culture has no roots but only shoots; and if you forget to water the roots, the shoot is bound to die.

Before reclaiming what Vedic Culture had to say about this issue, the present scenario has to be analysed in light of the crimes that occur due to the honour stigma that has been attached to the girls. According to CARE's report, 2015, Child marriage for the protection of pre-marital virginity has been a crime prevalent till date in most South Asian countries. In this way, the objectification of newborns start since their birth as if they are some material whose purity is an acute responsibility and thus is transferred from one shoulder to the other and in which the object (here the girl) has no say.

In different reports by UN and WHO, Female Genital Mutilations (FGM) has been

recognized as the under-reported yet one of the frequently occurring crimes in South-Asia including Southern India. Communities have celebrations marking this event as a control over woman's sexuality. As defined by World Health Organisation, FGM includes all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.

According to United Nation's Population Fund (UNPF), breast ironing is the one of the five under-reported crimes relating to gender-based Violence along with "bride napping", traumatic fistula, femicide and child marriage prevalent in South Asian countries. It's the brutal flattening of a Young Girl's developing chest to protect her from rape and sexual harassment. It is believed that if the breasts would be flattened, the girls would appear less feminine and attractive.

The following recent reports from the news agencies clearly show how frequent are the crimes relating to honour as they have their roots in many other crimes too:

1. "A lady was gang-raped for voting for a candidate that culprits were not supporting."  
(News courtesy: Amar Ujala, 2nd December 2015.)
2. "India: Muslim man kills 4-year-old daughter for not covering her head while eating dinner."  
(News courtesy: Mailonline, dated 5 October 2015.)
3. "Muslim father of Indian Nationality strangled daughter, 19, to death after she was caught stealing condoms for sex with her forbidden boyfriend in Germany."  
(News Courtesy: Mailonline, dated 28 September, 2015.)
4. "Village Elder Kills grand-daughter over her Love Affair in Tamil Nadu."  
(News Courtesy: Express news services, dated 24th September 2015.)
5. "One of two Indian Sisters was sentenced to rape after 'untouchable' brother ran off with a married woman from higher caste."

(News courtesy: Mailonline, dated 31 August 2015.)

6. "Chennai: A 14 year old is coerced to keep her baby born out of rape as 'evidence'. A minor who tried to lodge a complaint against a man who violated her is asked to wait for three years to marry him."

(News Courtesy: TNN, dated 25 June 2015.)

As is clear from the above examples, the reported crimes were not only for the protection of honour but were also directed towards intentionally violating the honour. Any resentment towards a woman is shown through this violation. Even the legal judgements refrain from making strict laws and judgements on such crimes because the honour stigma continues to rule the mind set of our generations. Such is the severity of the situation in present times that the need is for the immediate de-stigmatization of honour.

To proceed with this, the first step is to recognize its determinants. Interestingly, the honour finds its manifestation differently for males and females. For men the honour is measured by their masculinity which is assumed to be manifested through following:

- Honour in controlling a woman's (especially wife's) body, money and resources.
- Honour in making a son.
- Honour in resisting and avenging rejection.

To fulfil these assumptions is an essentiality because these are the measure of their "masculinity". For this males are trained since their childhood. To fulfil the first assumption, they become prone to committing crimes like domestic violence, marital rape and control over the wife's, sister's, mother's income. To father a son, they do not refrain from the crimes of sex-selective abortion and female child infanticide. And the best way to handle rejection, they have learned in past decades is to throw acid or rape. The increasing trend of cyber bullying and blackmailing in the ever-increasing field of crime is because of the vulnerability of female honour.

The female honour on the other hand has a sole determinant that is her virginity. And all the crimes that are done to her are with the intention of violation or protection of the same. Child marriage, Female Genital Mutilation, rape, infanticides and

foeticides, all are because of the stigma of honour that the girls are born with due to the societal norms. As pointed out, the honour stigma forces men and women alike to inflict violence against women since their childhood.

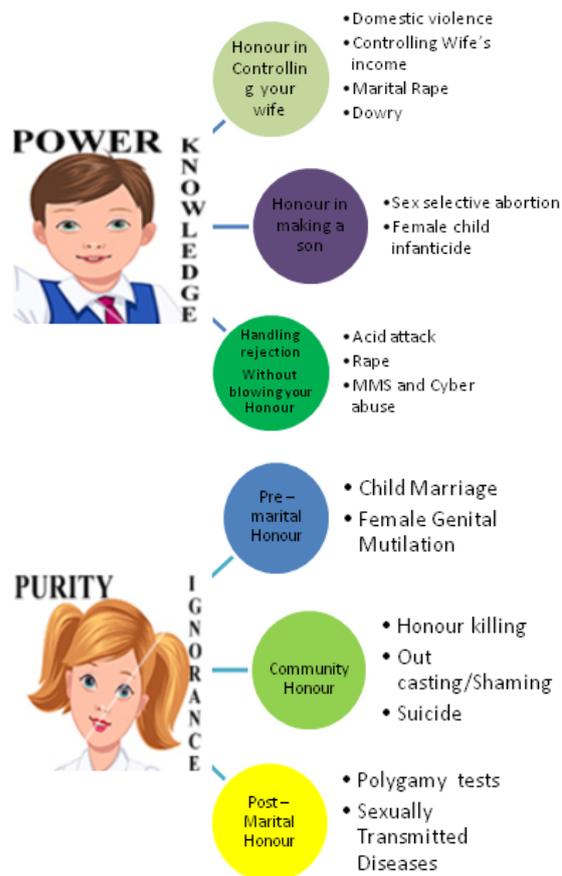
It is considered good and acceptable for the boys to have knowledge of things carrying sexual connotations as it gives them a source of power to exercise over women. However, even thinking about the issues carrying sexual connotations is considered impure for women. Innocence and ignorance is supposed to be her virtue.

Children since their birth are being told and trained in the practice of preserving their stigma because it is socially accepted. Why is the social system so? How it started? Why this system is imbalanced against women? Was it the same when it was first implemented? Are the present determinants of honour same as they were when it first started? These are the questions that cross most minds in the present generation because both man and women find themselves in an unwanted bondage due to this as men have an additional responsibility for protecting the women of the family from being raped or sexually violated. But owing to their societal affiliation and for confirming to the set standards of acceptable behaviour they prefer not to voice out these questions.

One of the most unjustified punishment happens in case of rape due to this stigma of honour attached to a girl's body. The victim has to undergo the trials of the society even when she is the wronged one. She has limited options; she can either stay quiet and live with the trauma all her life so that her social image and her family still remains presentable or she could complain in the court of law only to be traumatized again by the ruthless questioning of the lawyers. She is made to feel like the culprit for being raped. Further her prospects of a marriage or social acceptance are destroyed forever while her violators live a life of fulfilment even if they have been sentenced for the crime. Thus, this society built honour stigma does more wrong to a girl than the crime itself.

In order to proceed with feminist reforms, the perspective and thinking of the generation has to be changed so that the measures that are being

taken for reclaiming the equal status of women are accepted socially. The first step towards de-stigmatizing it is to discover its roots. This like most other societal norms has its roots grounded in culture. And culture directly is developed and sustained through mythology. To change a practice that has been sustained through mythological examples, a new set of mythological illustrations are needed. An interpretation of the same age-old stories has to be done in a new and convincing light. Because mythological literature like every art has the flaw of subjective interpretation. Thus, it is definitely possible that only that interpretation that confirms to the societal norms had been narrated since centuries leaving behind the real one. A reinterpretation of these texts aims to foreground what had been mis-communicated and hidden from the majority population of common man.



The present paper attempts to answer these questions with the help of India's most popular epic the *Mahabharata* and then seeks to suggest remedies for the present problems relating to honour. The dice-driven war of Mahabharata,

though fought by males of the clan was actually due to the power, control and wishes of the ladies of the family. The *Mahabharata* perhaps has the most powerful and inspiring female characters in the field of literature. Though the patriarchal influence of Bhishma runs throughout the epic, even his character falls short of appraisal and strength when compared with the ladies.

Mahabharata addresses many issues of feminism that are still relevant in the present scenario. A feminist and discourse study of the epic shows how the equality and at some places superiority of women has been established and the right code of conduct towards women has also been stated down in the lines if interpreted differently.

On the question and interpretation of virginity and female honour there are many examples throughout the epic. Four consecutive generations of queens had children outside their marriage and two of the queens have been unmarried mothers too. Starting with Satyawati who had given birth to Ved Vyas through her relationship with Rishi Parashar prior to her marriage to King Shantanu, we have Ambika and Ambalika who gave birth to Dhritarashtra and Pandu out of their relation with Ved Vyas. Kunti had given birth to Karna before her marriage by summoning God Sun and further she and Pandu's second wife Madri had sons through their relationships with other Gods. Draupadi was the next one to have relationship with five different men from whom she had five sons.

Pandu while trying to convince Kunti to have sons for him through different Gods told her how such relationships have not only been accepted and considered pure in the past but also were considered Dharma (Virtuous Duty):

"Now will I make known to thee the true essence of dharma, listen unto me the ancient dharma perceived by the lofty-minded knowers of it. In former times, as is well known, women were left unhindered (anavrita); O thou of the lovely face, going the way of their desires, in freedom they followed their own inclinations. (Kamachara bhavanti), O sweet-smiling one, neither man nor woman knew jealousy (Irshya nasti nari-naranaam); and, were free from fear, love and anger. When they, from the years of maidenhood on, did

trick their husbands; that was not seen as wrong. But, that was the right thing in former times. This was the moral order laid down by the rule of conduct; it was honoured by the great Rishis through observance, and to-day is still honoured among the Uttarakurus. For, this is the eternal law that shows favour to women. But, sadly, the barrier of to-day was set up in our world short while ago. Learn this now, O brightly-smiling one, from me ".  
Adi Parva (122.4-8)

He then tells how Svethakethu was prompted to bring the new moral order of conduct for woman and man, replacing the norms where the women enjoyed freedom and honour.

"Until then, women were not restricted to the house, they were not dependent on family members; they moved about freely, they enjoyed themselves freely. Until then they were free; they could sleep with any men they liked from the age of puberty; they could be unfaithful to their husbands, and yet were not viewed sinful... the greatest rishis have praised the ancient tradition-based custom;... the northern Kurus still practise it...the new custom is very recent." Adi Parva (122.4-8)

As it is clear from the above extract of the *Mahabharata*, women in pre-vedic and earlier Vedic era enjoyed a free status, had freedom of choice and freedom of sexual affiliations just like men. But the society had to undergo a change because the incidents like that of Madhvi, a great grand ancestor of Pandavas, would have given rise to objectification of women. Madhvi was given to a scholar by her father Yayati to be traded for the 800 horses the scholar had to give to his Guru as Dakshina (fees). He went to the Kings who traded a son from Madhvi for providing 200 hundred horses. Though Madhvi did it out of her duty to fulfil her father's words and her character was not at all considered fulfilled by the society then, she refused to enter into marriage alliance after this purpose has been fulfilled out of her will to be free. But to avoid such exchange and trade of women, the new order was thought to be essential.

Draupadi had been shown as the first one to fall on her way to heaven because of her love and preference for Arjuna. Hidimba had clearly shown sexual preference and love for Bheem and to be

with him she even assisted Bheem in killing her brother while Subhadra was the one to kidnap Arjuna so that she could marry him, the one she loves and not Duryodhan. Centuries before Mahabharata, Shakuntala, the mother of Bharat, from whom the Kurus descended showed a similar steadfastness when it came to marrying the one she loves, Dushyanta. They performed Gandharva Vivah where only the omnipresent Gods were the witnesses. A son was born to Shakuntala out of this union which had no witnesses in the society. Shakuntala was forgotten by Dushyanta due to the curse of Durvasa and had to live as a single mother in the society of that time yet there was none to question her purity. Shakuntala, herself was the illegitimate daughter of the celestial beauty Meneka and Rishi Vishwamitra who was abandoned by her parents at birth not out of shame but for the continuation of their individual duties. And yet she wasn't questioned in the society for the same. Thus, the entire epic abounds in the illustrations of women who boldly showed their preference and affection for the men they loved and who stood by their choices against all odds without being tabooed. And thus, the code of conduct despite being not as free as before was not as strict as it is now.

The most important point that has to be noted here is that despite having sexual relations with different men, the virgin status of Madhvi, Satyawati, Kunti and Draupadi remained intact. It is told in the epic that each one of them was blessed to restore her virgin status even after child-birth.

Hard to please, Rishi Durvasa gifted Kunti with a mantra that would summon at her will, any God. The girl, a short time thereafter, out of sheer child-like curiosity tested whether the mantra would really work. To her amazement it did work and the Sun presented himself and refused to go away unsatisfied. He coaxed the virgin princess Kunti to give approval for sex. Kunti then asked the Sun to assure that her virginity will remain unimpaired even after childbirth and that her son would replicate his father's glory. Similarly, Satyawati was blessed by sage Parashar with "virgo intacta.":

"When you have done me this favour you shall become a maiden again (garbham utsrija

mamakam.. kanyaiva tvam bhavishyasi;)"( Mbh:1.105.13)

She had asked Parashara to promise her that their relationship would be a secret and her virginity intact; the son born from it would be a famous sage; and her fragrance and youth would not perish. Draupadi too, despite having five husbands and bearing each of them a son, is regarded as a virgin who emerges chaste after each intercourse:

"the lovely one with glorious waist, the very mighty one, at the end of each day shall become a maid again" (Mbh: 1.197.14).

Kunti thus describes Draupadi to Krishna assarva-dharmopa-cayinam (the one who promotes or cultivates all virtues).

Thus, it may be the case that virginity in these contexts does not refer to "the state of their bodies but to the state of their being." Virginity here does not refer to the physical state of their hymen but to their unsullied mind and attitude. "It is a state distinguished by purity, detachment and independence." Their relationships were not out of desire or attachment. Their virginity stands for the state of being psychologically pure and untainted and the assertion of their own individual, independent identity. It is because of these virtues that Kunti and Draupadi are being sung about in this famous Sanskrit couplet:

"Ahilya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, Mandodari  
tatha

panchakanya smarein nityam, mahapatak  
nashanam."

Included among these five virgins are Ahilya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari all of whom are married and mothers and most of them had sexual relations with other men. This is another illustration to prove that the cultural heritage, that people claim to preserve by out-casting a rape-victim or scandalising sexual relationships of women or raising a brow on people's sexual affiliations, never actually considered virginity or sexual relations as a measure of one's character, honour, virtue and fidelity. The Vedic culture thus had

maintained the importance of purity of intentions, thoughts and souls and not of the body.

Virginity though related with physical body is actually an abstract concept in the mythology believed in South Asia. It is rooted in psychological and conscious abstinence from sin and the concept of sin does not include the quality of sexual relationship one has. India has always prided itself for being the land of the *Kamasutra* and Khajuraho. And even in *Kamasutra*, having sexual relation with more than one partner is not considered infidelity but an essentiality for a better and healthy sexual life. In ancient times, there were sexual healers for the soldiers suffering from post traumatic stress disorders after any war and these sexual healers were considered divine, pure and not someone to be shunned.

The concept of infidelity and viewing women as sexual objects was what led to the attachment of this honour stigma. It was an act for protection of women from objectification. But over time, under cross-cultural effects from around the globe and also after India's colonisation, this stigma came to hold the most crucial position in a growing girl's sense of self and also in her family.

English Literature since the advent of morality plays abounds in the examples that show that the relation of perceived purity of body with honour was a European concept. Prior to these, even in Europe, sexual mores were not that strict as we can see in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The effect of hybridization as explained by Homi Bhabha can be clearly seen here. Homi Bhabha in his essay 'Of Mimicry and Man' points out the colonisers' attempt to make the colonised adapt their values and standards so that they do not remain "other" to the colonisers. However, since the colonised have a culture of their own preserved through the history and mythology of their respective native lands that do not leave their psyche and thus they offer resistance to those values forced by the colonisers. As a result of this, there occurred a hybridisation of values instead of total transformation in which both the minds of the colonisers as well as colonised adapted some values of the other which with passage of time became indispensable for both.

Thus, there is a possibility that the West might have adapted the liberal sexual norms of South Asia soon after World War II which was also the time when most of the colonised Nation's achieved Freedom, thereby sending the colonisers back to their native land while the assimilation of western colonial values had led the people in these colonised countries to believe that the subjugation of women and their sexuality in the name of honour are in their own cultural heritage which as is clear from the examples from the *Mahabharata* is not. This concept of lowered status of women was essentially a Western concept brought to India by British and Mughals.

The tightening of this noose of honour had, has and is choking many girls nowadays. Thus, the need again is to reclaim the long lost past, rediscover its merits and leave behind its demerits so as to proceed in the direction of a more fulfilled existence. The stigmatization of honour itself is responsible for the lowered status that women are being driven to in the society. Because of this stigma attached to her and the stress placed on the need of its protection, every girl is conditioned into believing that she is vulnerable and hence must constantly seek protection. This further also leads to the objectification of women as a commodity to be protected, passed from father to brother and further to husband. Also, as stated earlier, the majority of crimes that have emerged in the recent past against women have been mainly due to the fact that society disowns a girl who does not conform to the relatively new standards of honour. Thus, all the issues emerging due to the Feminist movement can be better dealt with if not solved through the de-stigmatization of honour for girls.

The need is also to sensitize the children of coming generation, both boys and girls, as well as the present generation to a renewed concept of honour that is neither easily violated nor related to just a female body but to the greater concept of virtue, goodness and purity of thoughts and intentions. They must be told that the honour is not lost through sexual relationships; it is however lost for those who fail to take consent; virginity is not a physical condition but a sense, an identity of self. And a woman must be considered honourable by

the mere fact of being a human being and not by the length of her veil or by the cloak that covers her chest. This will further help in making unbiased jurisdiction in cases of rape, sexual assault and the similar so-called "honour crimes" because the fog of honour that blurs the heinousness of such crimes will be lifted after this de-stigmatisation and further sensitization.

To sum up, it is quite appropriate to quote Sohaila Abdulali who is a renowned writer, editor, journalist and also a rape-victim and survivor:

"Rape is Horrible. But it is not horrible for all the reasons that have been drilled into the heads of women. It is Horrible because you are violated, you are scared, someone else takes control of your body and hurts you in the most intimate Way. It is not because you lose your "Virtue." It is not because your father and your brothers are dishonoured. I reject the notion that my virtue is located in my vagina, just as I reject the notion that men's Brains are in their Genitals."

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