

Rape Seen as a Side Effect of Sita's Death in the Poetry of Meena Kandasamy

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Abstract

The Ramayana's Sita is a name referred time and again whenever a case of sexual violence on women is heard. Patriarchal discourse projects Sita as the ideal woman and the renowned personalities invoke Sita and her ideal image of femininity, purity and chastity in their statements on rape victims and suggest that all women should follow the path of Sita so that they can be revered in the society. The patriarchal discourse calls the women who defy gender norms as liable for punishment like Shurpanakha. But, Kandasamy looks at Sita as a side effect on the lives of women in general and Dalit women in particular. This paper intends to study Kandasamy's poems centered around Sita's character and how she sees Sita as a side effect on the lives of women.

Key words: Discourse, ideal, patriarchy, Dalit, effect and defy.

Introduction

Dalit women are subjugated under two distinct patriarchal structures. One is the Brahminical patriarchal structure and other is Dalit patriarchal structure. While Dalit women are doubly oppressed the atrocities on sex workers go unheard. The patriarchal knowledge system has set strict rules on women and those rules are entrenched in the psyche of society so much so that even women try to abuse other women who try to defy patriarchal norms and be assertive about their life. One can refer to some comments on rape incidents to

understand the misogyny in present scenario. It can be seen that there are frighteningly insensitive comments like parents need to introspect on why a girl should go out at night. This question does not apply to men. The notion behind such comments is that a woman has to live under constant vigilance. Thus rape and victim blaming has been normalized in the patriarchal discourse. “Even if we provide one policeman per house we can’t stop crimes against women... The rise in atrocities against women is due to obscene images used in advertisements”- this was the remark made by RR Patil, Home Minister for Maharashtra State as quoted by BBC News update titled “Indian politicians’ ‘unfortunate’ rape remarks”. Here some other such quotes from public discourse are referred to see why feminist writers like Kandasamy go back to Sita.

The Hindu news titled “Don’t cross ‘Lakshman rekha,’ Minister tells women” updated on 05th January 2013 quotes the remark made by Kailash Vijayvargiya, a renowned politician from Madhya Pradesh. He had referred to Sita’s abduction by Ravan while giving his opinion on the reasons for raise in sexual atrocities against women. He had opined, “Only when Sitaji crossed the Lakshman Rekha, she was kidnapped by Ravan ... If Sitaji (woman) crosses the Lakshman Rekha, then Sitaharan (abduction) is bound to take place as Ravans are out there.” The State Industries Minister had opined referring to crimes against women, “When people cross their limits, deterioration is bound to happen”. One can refer to a comment made by Swamy Asaram Bapu, a spiritual leader. He had stated in the aftermath of Delhi gang rape that the victim Jyoti Sing was equally responsible for the rape on her. He had said that “Only five-six people are not the culprits. The girl is as guilty as her rapists. She should have called the culprits brothers and begged before them to stop. This could have saved her dignity and life. Can one hand clap? I don’t think so.” This remark is misogynistic as it implies that rape means the act of losing dignity and life for a woman. His statement implies that it is a loss of dignity and life for the rape victim and not for the man who committed a heinous crime like rape. Such outrageous statements are referred here to point out that they are coming up even today by spiritual, political persons, common people including women whenever a rape atrocity surfaces.

Kandasamy's protest against misogyny:

A new generation Dalit women writer, Meena Kandasamy echoes the suffering and oppressive conditions of women living amidst such misogynistic discourses. The present paper focuses on the portrayal of Sita in Kandasamy's select poems and looks at how she tries to condemn the use of Sita's image of obedient women in the patriarchal discourse to subdue the women's voice. Kandasamy is a poet, activist, fiction writer. She hails from Chennai, Tamil Nadu. She has published two collections of poetry *Touch* (2006) and *Ms Militancy* (2010). *Ms Militancy*, *Touch* and other poems of Kandasamy unleash the mythical women characters from the burden of carrying patriarchal ideologies. At the same time, she presents her women characters as brave and unbridled who take charge of their lives. Her semi-autobiographical novel *When I Hit You* presents the situation of a wife in modern day life. Her other works like *The Gypsy Goddess* and her articles voice her concern for the marginalized sections of society and gender issues.

Sita and Lakshman Rekha as used in the public discourse on rape victims:

Her poem "Shame" from *Touch* (58), ironically calls Sita as a side effect on the everyday life of women. She seems to be suggesting that Sita's whole life of submissiveness and docility has caused side effect on the lives of women. The last line of the poem, "Alas, her death/is an irrevocable side effect" (28) refers to Sita from Ramayana. She calls her death a 'side effect' referring to a gang rape on Dalit girl. She condemns the public discourse which says that women should not cross Lakshman Rekha and should stay at home being aware of possible consequences of rape.

Role of caste in gender violence:

The poem "Shame" expresses that rape on Dalit girl "is much too common place" (11) and her other poem "Rape Nation" published in her twitter handle points out at the power structure which leads Dalit women to such situations where upper caste men easily get scot free of charges of rape. "Dalits cannot rule they cannot rage, or even mourn. / This has happened before, this will happen again" (4-5).

“Rape Nation” is a powerful poem on the death of a Dalit gang rape victim in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh. In this case, a Dalit girl was gang-raped and the police and district administration of Hathras cremated her body without bothering about the consent of victim’s family. It is not just gender based violence, but also a caste based violence. The lines, “public’s prying eyes / segregate her-the victim” (5-6) of the poem “shame” delineates the role of caste in segregating the victims on the basis of caste.

Protest against misogyny and victim blaming:

Rape is seen as shame. It is the victim who would be made to suffer shame than the rapists in the patriarchal structure. The lines from the poem “Shame”, “tests of fire-/ the ancient medicine for Shame” (25-26) refers to the fire ordeal that Sita went through to prove her chastity. Sita gets blamed for crossing the Lakshmana Rekha. Patriarchal ideology claims that Sita had to endure so much suffering because of her disobedience to Lakshmana rekha. Similarly, present day women are blamed for recurring rape atrocities. Women’s clothing choices, roaming around at nights, having boyfriends, want of leading life individually and defying of the rules set for them are getting considered as the reasons for sexual violence on women. Kandasamy confronts such notions and says that she has problem with any story that stays the same for too long. Her writing is a sarcastic take on such misogynistic views.

Her poem “Rape Nation” talks about the role of Sanatana dharma in victim blaming in rape incidents. Victim blaming can be seen whenever a rape incident surfaces. Here, the Delhi rape incident can be remembered. In the “Indias Daughter” a documentary on Nirbhaya case shows how even a well-educated defense lawyer for the accused persons blames Jyoti the rape victim as the reason for rape on her. The accused person in the said case says that they committed this crime to teach a lesson to the victim that she should not come out at late hours and this view of the accused resembles the discourse of Lakshmana Rekha. Thus, a rape victim will be made to suffer shame, disgrace and helplessness in the society as the society holds women as responsible for raise in sexual atrocities. “Rape Nation” narrates the Hathras rape incident and tells now it is not the

first time and won't be the last. Talking about the fire set on the body of raped girl she asks,

“What does that fire remember? The screams of Satis
dragged to their husband's pyres and brides burnt alive;
the wails of caste-crossed lovers put to death,
the tongue-chopped shrieking of raped women.

This has happened before, this will happen again. (6-10)

In the poem, she opines that Manu and Sanatana dharma are functioning behind normalization of victim blaming and misogynistic discourses prevailing in the society.

Her poems from *Ms Militancy* try to unleash her women characters from the burden of being obedient to patriarchal ideologies. Her women characters let loose their emotions. She reinterprets the mythological characters and the gender and caste ideologies entrenched within them. The poem “Random Access Man” (46) is based upon the image of Rama and Sita. It subverts the ideal notions that are there on their image. In mainstream writing, Rama has been called as the ideal man and an ideal husband. Kandasamy has attempted to subvert this image of Rama and points out that he was cold to his wife. She compares him to Gandhi saying “He was not a husband / who shared his spoonful either –on /cold nights he played Gandhi” (3-5). The poem “Princess-in-exile” (45) refers to Sita. She calls her as the Princess-in-exile but it is ridiculous to say that she wanted to walk out of her relationship with her king and she had perfected the ‘vanishing act’. In the poem “Traitor” (58), Kandasamy re-reads the constructed ugly notions around Surpanakha. She tells that Surpanakha was deformed intentionally by Rama and Lakshmana to set her as an example to show those women who stand against patriarchal ideologies. “The married man, the taller one, smelt something fishy. / Bigamy and a phobia of bickering wives made him plot” (9-10)

Conclusion:

Kandasamy's poems intend to bring awareness among the public about the dangers of misogynistic views perpetuating in the society. Her extreme ways of subversive reading of the mythological characters is directed towards the much needed attempts of bringing

awareness about the fundamental rights of women and to see a positive change in one's view on the same.

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