

The Unbearable Gendering of Being: Performance of ‘Womanhood’ as a Source of Stress

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ABSTRACT

Stress can be embedded in social structures; vulnerabilities rooted in social roles. Gender offers an important frame of reference to examine how sources of stress can be located in the socio-cultural landscape of one’s surroundings. The study takes up two texts, one written and one visual, one created thousands of years ago and one in 2017, and subjects them to social-psychological analysis. Via Thematic Analysis the possibility of any parallels that can be drawn between womanhood in the traditional and contemporary times is explored. The first text is Manusmriti- an ancient legal text of the early Indian society written by sage Manu, and the second is ‘Lipstick Under My Burkha’ a Bollywood film set in a small town of India (Srivastava, 2017). The analysis in general points to a relentless ‘burden’ that womanhood continues to carry, difficult to keep aside and quite often difficult to detect, and examines women’s complicity in their own sub-ordination by patriarchy. In the Indian context, womanhood thereby appears to be synonymous with stress. Findings resonate with the association between increased prevalence of mental health issues in women and their vulnerable location in a patriarchal society (WHO, 1993).

Key Words : Womanhood, Stress, Patriarchy, Sexism

INTRODUCTION

In a patriarchal society, vulnerabilities for women are engineered into social structures and roles. Circumstances that are accepted in a society as normal could very well be potential risk factors for mental health issues in women. Expected to fulfil a variety of roles with the status of a sub-ordinate, the construction and maintenance of womanhood comes with being undervalued and overworked on one end and being in a state of tussle with the female experience constructed by the society on the other. Epidemiological data has already established associations between mental health and alienation and powerlessness, which are more commonly experienced by women (Russo, 1985 cited in WHO, 1993). In light of this understanding, a question worth asking is if there could be any commonalities in performance of womanhood today and that a few centuries ago? Are there any constants in the issues that plagued women then and those that plague them today?

Can parallels be drawn between how easy or difficult it is to escape the burden, if any, of womanhood today and back then? What happened then and what happens today when women behave in ways that are considered ‘inappropriate’ or ‘wrong’ for them? Two texts, one written and one visual, from two different time periods were taken for analysis to examine these questions. The first is Manusmriti- an arguably authoritative piece of traditional literature written by sage Manu, and the second is Lipstick Under My Burkha- a critically acclaimed Bollywood film (Srivastava, 2017).

Contextualizing the stress:

Manusmriti is considered one of the most important works of ancient India- it is regarded as the most authoritative statement on Dharma, and hence outlining the divine code of conduct for Hindus. Scholars however disagree on how influential it actually was as a book of laws. Some believe that there’s an undue overemphasis on Manusmriti when popular and scholarly debates on

position of women in ancient India are considered. “Both in pre-modern and in modern India, laws, especially written laws, are accessible to very few people and followed by even fewer, while most people are more likely to follow practices that are customary within their local castes and communities” (Vanita, 2003). The author further talks about how Manusmriti was made important by the British during their early years of colonial rule in India. In search for a digest of Hindu laws to make their administration work easier, Manusmriti and other ancient treatises were translated by the British, and Manusmriti, among others, was used by them as justification to colonise India in order to rid it of its social evils (Vanita, 2003). Regardless of how influential Manusmriti has been at various points of history, it is without doubt an important thread in the fabric of the Indian cultural being be it due to how much criticism it receives or how much it continues to be celebrated/defended. As recently as 2000, a statue of Manu was installed in the precincts of the Rajasthan high court by its admirers! In protest, several copies of Manusmriti were burnt, which is now a standard way of protesting by women’s rights activists in the country. This is because when it comes to women, Manusmriti has the reputation of endorsing several beliefs that justify their subordination. Its defenders however point out the several *shlokas* that are pro-women and accuse the critics of Manusmriti of selective quoting. All in all, Manusmriti continues to attract acclaim and criticism, and is arguably very much alive in the collective consciousness of the nation.

Lipstick Under My Burkha is a film released in July, 2017 in India that follows the lives of four women staying in one building in a small town (Srivastava, 2017). The film is now both a commercial and a critical hit, having won eleven international film festival awards prior to its official release and raking up earnings more than 5 times its budget. It had its fair share of controversies even before its release. Initially the film’s certification was declined in India by the Central Board of Film Certification, India because “the story is lady oriented, their fantasy above life. There are continuous sexual scenes, abusive words, audio pornography and a bit sensitive touch about one particular section of society” (Firstpost, 2017). This had created an uproar in the social media and the interest around the film built up even more. After a battle of 5 months and the intervention of the Film Certification Appellate Tribunal (FCAT), India the film was released with an ‘A’ certificate with a few

alterations. It has since then been hailed as one of the most significant films of our times. The following sections throw light on some of the themes emergent in the two texts drawn out via Thematic Analysis.

Womanhood: Then and now:

Manusmriti explicitly lays down the hierarchy between men and women and posits that men are to always have dominion over women, be it to care for or exert control over them. “*In childhood a female must be subject to her father; in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent.*” This might be interpreted as stemming from good intentions- a woman must never be left to fend for herself- but even then it is rooted in sexism, albeit of a benevolent nature. This power differential is the most apparent in a marital relationship wherein husbands are given the status equivalent to God in some places and to Guru or teacher in others: “*The nuptial ceremony is stated to be the Vedic sacrament for women (and to be equal to the initiation), serving the husband (equivalent to) the residence in (the house of the) teacher...*” This system makes no exceptions for men who could be considered undeserving of respect by some standards: “*Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, (yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a God by a faithful wife.*” In the present age, such husbands may not be worshipped as Gods but relationships with them are certainly endured. In Lipstick Under My Burkha, Shireen (Konkona Sen Sharma) is routinely subjected to unprotected sex by her dominating husband Rahim (Sushant Singh) because of which she has to get multiple abortions. She is advised by her gynaecologist to use only condoms as contraceptives because of an internal infection but her husband throws away the condom packet she gets for him. She keeps her job as a saleswoman a secret as her husband would not approve of her working outside home. She finds out that he is having an affair and follows the other woman to her home, subtly letting her know that she should stop seeing him. Rahim finds out about it and that his wife is working and punishes her by raping her, not for the first time in the film. He mocks her and commands her to quit her job and stop trying to act like the husband in the relationship.

In both the texts, the dominion of the man over the woman is thereby considered normal. This is also reflected in the norms around age in both. Manusmriti states: “*A*

man, aged thirty years, shall marry a maiden of twelve who pleases him, or a man of twenty-four a girl eight years of age; if (the performance of) his duties would (otherwise) be impeded, (he must marry) sooner.” With such difference in age, and with the woman sometimes practically a child when considered eligible to get married, domination by the husband appears inevitable. In *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, Usha (Ratna Pathak Shah), 55, meets a man about her age in a family function and appears to be attracted to him. She is immediately thereafter introduced to him by his sister as ‘Buaji’ or aunt and appears visibly dejected. The man on the other hand is introduced as a young widower, who lost his wife at the age of 56 and has a long life ahead of him, for whom she is looking for a wife. The sister goes on to say that a woman of even 35 would do as her sister-in-law. The contrast between expectations around sexuality with regards to age for men and women were captured poignantly by the resulting awkwardness between Usha (Ratna Pathak Shah) and the gentleman who had a few moments ago shared glances that conveyed mutual attraction.

Another momentous scene in *Lipstick Under My Burkha* has Usha (Ratna Pathak Shah) being asked her name by her swimming instructor, to which she replies “Buaji” which means paternal aunt. On being asked to tell her actual name, it takes her a moment to remember her name and she softly repeats it to herself several times, perhaps hearing it after a long time. It is apparent that she has been ‘Buaji’ since a long time, literally and metaphorically. The subsuming of a woman’s individual identity beneath the identity of being somebody’s mother/wife/aunt etc. is an exercise tended to not just by others but even by oneself as a woman. It also points to the huge importance given to relationships for women: when speaking of women, one often talks about mothers and sisters, perhaps not realising that some women may very well be outside the ambit of these roles. In *Manusmriti*, it is almost as if a woman doesn’t exist if she is not somebody’s somebody: *“She must not seek to separate herself from her father, husband, or sons; by leaving them she would make both (her own and her husband’s) families contemptible.”* Marriage and devotion to wifely duties are considered equivalent to worshipping God for women. *“No sacrifice, no vow, no fast must be performed by women apart (from their husbands); if a wife obeys her husband, she will for that (reason alone) be exalted in heaven.”*

In *Manusmriti*, it is easy to spot a list of prescriptive and proscriptive traits for women, or traits that distinguish the ‘good woman’ from the ‘bad woman’. A good woman is obedient, adept at domestic duties, son-bearing, patient of hardships, self-controlled, religious, chaste and beautiful. A bad woman is one that is son-less, engages in infidelity, has had abortion, consumes liquor, remarries after husband’s death, travels abroad, is separated from husband, lives in other men’s homes, keeps bad company etc. *“Drinking (spirituous liquor), associating with wicked people, separation from the husband, rambling abroad, sleeping (at unseasonable hours), and dwelling in other men’s houses, are the six causes of the ruin of women.”* For men, the vices are liquor, dice, hunting and women. The public-private sphere distinction wherein the former is exclusively for males and the latter for females is also apparent. *“Let the (husband) employ his (wife) in the collection and expenditure of his wealth, in keeping (everything) clean, in (the fulfilment of) religious duties, in the preparation of his food, and in looking after the household utensils.”* The private sphere is in fact deified to a great extent: *“serving the husband (equivalent to) the residence in (the house of the) teacher, and the household duties (the same) as the (daily) worship of the sacred fire.”*

It is clear that there’s a certain burden that comes attached with womanhood in *Manusmriti*, wherein one is continuously invested in an effort to live up to the standards set forth for a ‘good woman’. Several such duties still abound in the Indian society wherein the woman has to shoulder the weight of expectations that appear to make her more vulnerable than a man. All four protagonists of *Lipstick Under My Burkha* would make for good examples. Stifled with limits on their dreams, from what they could wear or live like (Rehana or Plabita Borthakur) to when or whom they could marry (Leela or Aahana Kumra) to being able to work outside home (Shireen or Konkona Sen Sharma) to expressing one’s sexuality at an age when women are deemed to be asexual (Usha or Ratna Pathak Shah), all four of them lived secret lives with small rebellions that let them breathe in spurts.

Womanhood in the Indian context, through the ages, thus appears to be synonymous with stress. A WHO (1993) report on psychosocial factors and women’s mental health provided significant empirical support for the link between increased prevalence of mental health

issues in women and their vulnerable location in a patriarchal society. A case in point is the contrasting effect of marriage for men and women in India. "In the context of marital relationship, previous research has indicated that for men, marriage confers protection against illness, while it appears to be associated with higher rates of depression for women. There has been some evidence that within marriage, the traditional role of the female is limiting, restricting and even boring, which may lead to depression" (Nambi, 2005). It is easy to see that in the kind of marriages that are depicted in the two exemplars, the role of the woman is indeed limiting and restricting.

Loved and oppressed at the same time: How it works:

A number of pronouncements in the Manusmriti that are to do with women are seemingly self-contradictory. In some places women seem to be exalted:

"Women must be honoured and adored by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law, who desire (their own) welfare. Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards. Where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes; but that family where they are not unhappy ever prospers"

In some other places, women seem to be regarded with suspicion and attributed with traits like heartlessness, dishonesty, malice and great powers of seduction

"Women do not care for beauty, nor is their attention fixed on age; (thinking), '(It is enough that) he is a man,' they give themselves to the handsome and to the ugly. Through their passion for men, through their mutable temper, through their natural heartlessness, they become disloyal towards their husbands, however carefully they may be guarded in this (world)."

On looking closer, one realises that throughout the text two distinct categories of women are being spoken of. The first category belongs to women that stay within the boundaries of the patriarchal imagination and play by its rules. These women are deserving of respect and adoration of men, and must be protected and cherished by them, even revered as goddesses. Such women should never have to fend for themselves and must always be taken care of by the men in their lives. Let's call these women the 'good women'. The second category belongs to women that don't fit within the mould of the 'good

women' as pictured by the society. These are women who are disrespectful, quarrelsome, rebellious, unable to produce progeny, consume liquor, have abortion, remarry after husband's death, live with bad company, separate from husband etc. These women are deserving of punishment, ranging from being superseded by taking another wife to punishment in the afterlife. Even physical abuse is sanctioned.

A similar picture emerges when one analyses the fall from grace of Usha (played by Ratna Pathak Shah) in *Lipstick Under MyBurkha*. Usha, 55, is the old matriarch who has the final word on major decisions of the household. She owns property and is influential in the community in the small town the film is set in, being introduced as "our neighbourhood celebrity" by a character one time. However, when she is suspected of having posed as a younger woman on phone to engage in intimate conversations with a man, her family members that were seen as being always servile in her presence barge into her room to go through her possessions. On her erotic novels and swim wear being discovered (she took swimming lessons without telling her family) and the suspicions being confirmed, Usha is insulted by her nephews and their wives for having sexual urges at such an old age. She is condemned for having brought shame to the family and is thrown out of the house lest she has a bad influence on the grandchildren. At 55, she is expected to be asexual and having defied those expectations, she is no longer seen as deserving of any of the privileges she enjoyed before.

So as long as one stays within the mould of a 'good woman' one deserves to be honoured, cherished and protected. The moment one dares to rebel, one loses it all. Thereby, in the ancient as well as the contemporary times, a carrot and stick strategy seems to have been in place to ensure that the status quo with regards to the position of women in the society didn't get challenged.

This can be explained by the 'Ambivalent Sexism Theory' which explains prejudice towards women as being composed of "two complementary ideologies" that work together to maintain and legitimise gender based social hierarchies and to justify gender inequality (Glick and Fiske, 1996). These ideologies are Benevolent Sexism and Hostile Sexism. Benevolent Sexism has three components: the idea that women should be protected by men (Protective Paternalism), that women are more caring, more nurturing and in general nicer people than men (Complementary Gender Differentiation, and that

men derive intimacy from their romantic partners (Heterosexual Intimacy). In a nutshell, Benevolent Sexism favours a pro-women attitude on the surface which is at the heart of chivalry. Hostile Sexism on the other hand is what comes to mind when we imagine sexism- the outright sexist beliefs/acts that easily get labelled as sexist. It has three components: The idea that the existing system is legitimate and men should have more power than women (Dominative Paternalism), that men are more competent than women (Competitive Gender Differentiation), and lastly men associating sex with power and resenting women who are perceived as controlling men by acting as gatekeepers of sex (Heterosexual Hostility). A large body of research has now proved a significant correlation between Benevolent Sexism and Hostile Sexism. Thus Benevolent Sexism and Hostile Sexism are an “interlocking set of beliefs that reflects a system of rewards (BS) and punishment (HS)” (p.117) that motivate women to accept a sexist system (Glick and Fiske, 2001).

In *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, as long as Usha (Ratna Pathak Shah) kept up the facade of an asexual, religious woman considered appropriate for a 55-year old widow, she commanded enormous respect and had decision-making power in the family. The moment her sexuality was discovered, she was shorn of all the respect she enjoyed and a place in the house she owned. The system of rewards in Manusmriti for remaining loyal, chaste, obedient, religious, self-controlled, adept at domestic duties and bearing sons range from respect and support from husband and not being superseded by another wife to continued companionship with husband in the afterlife:

“She who, controlling her thoughts, words, and deeds, never slights her lord, resides (after death) with her husband (in heaven), and is called a virtuous (wife). In reward of such conduct, a female who controls her thoughts, speech, and actions, gains in this (life) highest renown, and in the next (world) a place near her husband.”

Punishments range from physical abuse, fines, confinement and being superseded by another wife to torture in the afterlife: *“By violating her duty towards her husband, a wife is disgraced in this world, (after death) she enters the womb of a jackal, and is tormented by diseases (the punishment of) her sin.”*

Thus the rewards and punishments extend to life after death, and a woman is to stay true to her husband

and her duties even after he is no more. *“A faithful wife, who desires to dwell (after death) with her husband, must never do anything that might displease him who took her hand, whether he be alive or dead.”* So fidelity is beyond life, for a woman. *“At her pleasure let her emaciate her body by (living on) pure flowers, roots, and fruit; but she must never even mention the name of another man after her husband has died.”* A man is allowed to remarry in Manusmriti, even while the first wife is alive. It could be because she cannot produce progeny or is addicted/diseased/wasteful/quarrelsome/rebellious.

“She who drinks spirituous liquor, is of bad conduct, rebellious, diseased, mischievous, or wasteful, may at any time be superseded (by another wife). A barren wife may be superseded in the eighth year, she whose children (all) die in the tenth, she who bears only daughters in the eleventh, but she who is quarrelsome without delay.”

However it is made explicit that women who fulfil their duties deserve respect even if they have to give way to another wife for their husband: *“But a sick wife who is kind (to her husband) and virtuous in her conduct, may be superseded (only) with her own consent and must never be disgraced.”* The carrot-and-stick strategy of keeping women within the boundaries of patriarchal imagination by the twin forces of Benevolent Sexism and Hostile Sexism is thereby clear.

Women’s complicity in their sub-ordination:

Lipstick Under My Burkha holds a mirror to the patriarchy in Indian society and is relentless in its social commentary around the subjugation of women. It would be a mistake however to assume that it’s only the men that are responsible for women’s sub-ordination. The film shows even the women around the four female protagonists participate, actively or passively, in their subjugation. Rehana’s (Plabita Borthakur) mother was as responsible as her father in enforcing and monitoring the restrictions placed on her lifestyle and her dreams. When Usha (Ratna Pathak Shah) was discovered as having posed and seduced a young man over phone as Rosy, the wives of her nephews were as punishing in their reactions as their husbands. Being a woman doesn’t appear to automatically translate into solidarity for other women’s struggles/woes. Through powerful weapons like shame and dishonour, staying true to the system of

patriarchy seems to hold more importance than supporting one's family member.

Goffman's concept of 'performance' would be apt here in order to understand this phenomenon. In his seminal work 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life' (1959), Goffman makes use of the imagery of theatre to depict the import and nuances of face-to-face social interaction. In what he calls the 'dramaturgical model of social life', social interaction may be equated with a theatre, and people in everyday life with actors on a stage, each playing a variety of roles. All the activities of an individual are referred to as 'performance', and it is through this performance that people make sense of themselves, others and their situation. Their performance may or may not be intentional in the information it is communicating to others, but it confirms the identity of the actor in that situation as others are constantly making attributions about it and about the actor. According to Goffman, the pressure of idealized conduct is most apparent in marginalized people, because their deviance forces them into "discredited" or "discreditable" groups (Goffman 1963). Hence it is precisely the sub-ordinate status of women *vis-à-vis* men, even the 'good women', that puts them under pressure to call out the 'bad women' on their defiance of patriarchy. Women are hence no less faithful to patriarchy than men. The following theories help further understand this phenomenon of women being complicit in their own sub-ordination.

Jackman's (1994) velvet glove theory of protective paternalism talks about paternalism and deference as the two pillars on which gender inequality is maintained. Paternalism combines social control over a group with positive feelings towards them, much like the relationship between a father and his children. It is based on the belief that women require the care and protection of men. Deference conveys the reciprocation of the positive feelings by the subordinate group, here women, as they see no reason to challenge men's control over them. There's a constellation of beliefs that a majority of men and women were found to have that is consistent with paternalism and deference: there is positive regard for each other, belief that each gender has a unique set of traits and roles to play in society and support for this arrangement (Jackman, 1994 as cited in Wharton, 2009). Thus women are flattered into not rocking the boat and their subordination is maintained with their co-operation.

Jost and Banaji's (1994) theory of system justification suggests that members of both high- and low-

status groups participate in reinforcing and legitimising existing social systems by engaging in thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that support it. People are motivated to hold positive attitudes towards the prevailing social order, which contributes to internalisation of inferiority among members of sub-ordinate groups and having outgroup favouritism. This could be because of having a powerful need to "accommodate, internalize, and even rationalize key features of our socially constructed environments, especially those features that are difficult or impossible to change" (Jost *et al.*, 2004, p. 912). Thus, with no escape in sight out of a system that could stifle their existence, women go on to internalise their sub-ordination and co-opt maintaining patriarchy.

Conclusion:

Through socio-psychological analysis of two texts, one created thousands of years ago and one in 2017, the performance of womanhood in India was compared. This textual analysis indicated a relentless burden that continues to be associated with womanhood, though often difficult to detect and actively maintained by women as well as men. Women, by virtue of their situation in the largely patriarchal society, are exposed to several vulnerabilities that are a product of the socio-cultural forces around them. In a patriarchal society like India, vulnerabilities for women are engineered into social structures and roles, most pre-dominantly in their own families as the analysis shows. There are important implications of this for gender sensitisation programs. It is crucial to acknowledge that certain ideas are still widely prevalent in the Indian psyche in the present age that support and legitimise the sub-ordination of women. Without working at the thought level, reduction in gender based discrimination is unlikely to be very successful. It is also important to understand that not just hostile sexism but even benevolent sexism, that appears harmless on the surface, contributes to women's sub-ordinate status. Men and women need to be educated about the various mechanisms through which they themselves contribute to the maintenance of the gender inequality.

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