



Equity Share - The Need to Tip the Gender Scale at Home

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Abstract

The trajectory of human understanding is generally believed to be – man designed gender, gender assigned roles and roles validated the individual. This validation initiates a conflict between the genders as it is unfair, biased and inequitable. While a man basks in the name of tradition, physical prowess and quintessential male ego, a woman is taught to subsume all the acts of man with stoic silence. Notwithstanding, modernity, education and awareness, Indian man unhesitatingly resorts to overt or covert control and supremacy over either their spouse or sibling within the confines of home. The society and extended family brush aside such acts of violations as a natural reaction of the menfolk which are tolerated and sometimes sympathized. Literature and media, of late, are unequivocal in capturing such breaches as anything but normal. Meena Kandasamy's novel *When I Hit You* and Anubhav Sinha's movie *Thappad* while focussing on transgressions by married man also reassure woman that she should speak up and stand up without fear or shame. Even the slightest infringement of a woman's dignity is never ignored by creative and literary activists. Hopefully these efforts will make a woman lead her life with respect and self-belief.

Keywords

Validation, Subjugation, Regressive, Aberration, Transgression.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Societal Bias

The trajectory of human understanding is that man designed gender, gender assigned roles and roles validated the individual. This validation shows an imbalance in the gender scale, favouring and strengthening the male as compared to the female. Clearly, ideas related to the norms defining these roles are not empirical rather observational in nature. A man's

physic, stamina and hormones are directly contrasted with a woman's reproductive nature which needs to be protected. This logic was further extended to their social-standing and decision-making. A man is expected to be fiercely ambitious in career and money-making while a woman is expected to be gracefully accommodative by nature and caring home-maker by vocation. Thus, a timid man is believed to be less masculine and an audacious woman is believed to be less feminine. The norms are clearly drawn out in the society and any kind of aberration to this explicit bias is never tolerated or permitted in the name of tradition, religion and social practice.

Many thinkers, political leaders and theorists have been relentlessly fighting to break all unverified and regressive thoughts and beliefs about the genders. Particularly, women's rights' activists and feminists have advanced their arguments to protest and rebel against states, political community and individuals who lack sensitization to woman's body and emotions. They have consistently broken religious interpretations which declare man to be the supremo and woman to be the inherently inferior being. Even science, till about the twentieth century, argued that the male-female divide is not merely genital, but also related to the intellect with man being more rational and logical and a woman being more emotional. Political

history of nations, on the other hand, gave more voice to man who governed laws which made man the protector of a woman while undermining her potential. It took many radical movements and revolutions for women to cry out loud that all human beings are equal and free and that a woman is not inferior or slave to a man.

In contemporary times, in many countries, thanks to the progression of education and exposure, the status of women in society is taken seriously with laws being promulgated to protect women and efforts being initiated to sensitise the public to treat women with dignity. Though it is ephemerally a commendable move, the question of whether the mindset of a man has really changed needs to be assessed and analysed.

2. Covert Subjugation at Home

Man, for a long time, enjoyed a dominant position in society, family and specifically in marriage. Whether he was successful in life or not, his wife had to look up to him with pride and respect to appease his ego. All his needs were taken care with loyalty and attention. He derived immense satisfaction in the social status given to him when he kept his wife and children in order. But, unfortunately, he achieved all this because his wife, the silent and suppressed woman at home, took all the battering and tendered only her consent without any questions. Even today, a man, notwithstanding modernity and education, feels blessed when he has an obedient wife and becomes restless when his wife is smart and efficient. He holds a grudge when woman occupy positions of power and responsibility. It is, according to him, a direct threat to his existence and position.

Thus, man is still at the cross-roads, not able to get over the traditional mindset completely while knowing fully well that he cannot any longer brag about his supremacy as a masculine gender. Hence, there is any implicit and covert subjugation that he practices at home, within the confines of the wall.

The Indian society has transformed to a great extent with women being allowed to pursue careers and earn money depending upon their knowledge level and exposure. Indian men, too, are greatly comfortable in marrying career-woman. As far as the career options are concerned, women make a cautious and genuine effort to tread into physically challenging and highly competitive fields. Even women, who are homemakers, try to live a meaningful and efficient life. In the last two decades, Indian women are braving several restrictive conventional factors to co-exist with men while being resilient and enterprising. However, there is an immense hurdle to overcome for almost every woman – the inexplicable and imminent pressure to appease the male ego before setting out to conquer the world.

Marriage is a happy union of two individuals who decide to propagate their lineage. The relationship between the husband and wife should be equitable in all respects with love, respect and space. Any feeling of dominance by the man will only disturb the equilibrium of the family. Acts like looking down upon house-hold chores and child-rearing, controlling

family decision-making and finance or prioritizing his parents and sibling needs more than her are some of the non-physical acts of supremacy. On the other hand, violent expression of anger and frustration or indulging in coercive sexual intercourse with the spouse are acts of subjugation and oppression. Men, with all the awareness given through education and legal system, indulge in such deeds of enslavement surreptitiously within the house or privately within the bedroom. This victimised and agonised woman of the home, with little support from the extended family or the society at large, has to tolerate these domestic acts of transgression by the husband with silence. Discussing such issues with others will only attract social ostracism to the wife and dent the image of the family.

3. Literary Activism by Meena Kandasamy

Nevertheless, activism by literary and media personalities have relentlessly strived to expose such acts of covert subordination by men in various genres and forms. In the last two decades, several activists have vehemently voiced these concerns of women through various platforms. While sexual exploitation by a man in the work-place or in the public draws a lot of attention when reported, the repression that happens at home with the wife is often ignored as family issue. Ironically, men don't realise that in either way it is a woman who is battered and silenced.

Meena Kandasamy is definitely one of the modern women writers of India who never hesitates to speak her mind while disclosing threadbare her intimate and personal experiences and feelings. Such writers, especially women writers, expose the underbelly of the unquestionable cultural and gender norms upheld sacredly by the custodians of the society. She resolves to break the myth that modern-day love marriages are equipoised and harmonious. Notwithstanding their education or modern outlook, men as husbands treat women as objects of possession who will listen, obey and execute their instructions. Personal interests or desires of a wife will and shall be in concurrence with her husband.

Kandasamy's novel *When I Hit You* (also *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait Of The Writer As A Young Wife*) is a young wife's undaunted recount of violence behind doors. This novel, in a way, is a fictional account of the novelist's own abusive marital life. It is a compelling and persuasive analysis of modern marriage, especially Indian marriages. The perpetuation of violence by a misogynist husband is the crucial aspect which the novelist intends to highlight.

The unnamed narrator of the novel, the young battered wife, is an educated and well-informed girl who chooses to marry the man of her choice, despite the objection from her parents. Equally significant is the unnamed husband, the chauvinistic, treacherous and insecure man who admires his lady-love's political affiliation and intelligence before marriage but abhors these traits after marriage as it threatens his competence and stature. So, he conveniently resorts to accepted social norms which allow and normalises abuse and violence of the dominant male over his wife. The wife's cre-



ative ability, learned social and political observations, social media activity via Twitter or Facebook and even her emails are all brought under scrutiny and finally banned by her husband through emotional blackmail and coercion. Her movements are monitored and restricted to the house. Mobile phone usage is also controlled and allowed to be used only in his presence. Though his actions seem to be bordering on some kind of mental instability, he manages to convince her parents, common friends and neighbours that these acts of control are normal by a husband and that a wife should understand that it is for the peace of her family.

4. Violence behind Doors

The worst act of domestic terrorism is his violence on the bed. It begins with sex without consent and progresses into forced and unwilling intercourse. When he realises that his wife is enduring the pain in a stoic and indifferent manner without being shattered, he resorts to the worst form of marital violence of forceful and treacherous penetration. He uses it as a weapon to numb her senses. This man fully understands that his wife has no option of complaining it to the outside world, as it is a taboo and shame to disclose or elaborate such issues in public.

However disturbing it is to the reader, it is a reality. The insensitive socio-cultural norm and the acceptable gender superiority determine the behaviour of the husband and not how modern or educated he is. Marriage for a man, where mostly he is the provider, is a means to perpetuate his power and dominance. His coital act with his wife is something that he is entitled to and beyond anyone's scrutiny. The willingness or cooperation of the wife is insignificant and inconsequential. Having been bred and nurtured in such a social system, he fails to be rational or ethical. He enjoys such permeant transgressions without a regret or remorse.

Under such circumstances, the only recourse that a wife can take is through the legal system. In India, the legal system has conveniently kept marital rape out of its ambit. While some legal experts argue that it can be difficult to investigate or prove marital rape in a court of law, a law against this crime will definitely act as a deterrence to men and thereby bring about an enforced change in the mindset. The rationale and necessity behind enacting any law are to protect the people, especially the voiceless and the less privileged. In patriarchal societies, it is the women who are the silent sufferers irrespective of their class or education. They can have a seemingly happy exterior while concealing an oppressive and abusive home.

5. Anubhav Sinha's Slap on Every Face

Another compelling movie of the recent times, on this issue of unbridled male supremacy in the Indian society, is the Hindi movie, Thappad (To Slap) by Anubhav Sinha. The movie is, in fact, a slap on every individual's face to either wake up to such injustice or to keep away from such practices. It is

a story of a woman that augments to be the story of many women who are fighting against all forms of male entitlement. The hidden chauvinistic demon in the most well-placed and well-mannered man is pick out and displayed on a pedestal to the scrutiny of everyone who wishes to brush it under carpet as an insignificant domestic issue. The director, Anubhav Sinha with his co-writer Mrunmayee Lagoo Wikul has made a very subtle but powerful impact on the Indian male psyche and encouraged women not to take any act of oppression timidly, even from her husband.

Amrita, the protagonist and the wife of Vikram, is a very ambitious and busy corporate professional. She has given up her plans to take up a career after marriage to meet the demands of her domestic chores. She disconcertingly goes about her every day routine of making food, cleaning the house and attending to the needs of her husband and mother-in-law. Amrita's little ailments, likes and dislikes, and boredom are all subsumed by the hectic life of her husband who gloats in the feeling of being the money-maker and provider of the family. He takes her for granted and uses her to his advantage to further his career prospects.

6. Unfair Aggrandisement

During a party at home, when Vikram gets to know that a senior colleague has let him down by not recommending his name to head a foreign assignment, he takes out his anger on his wife in front of the entire gathering. He slaps her hard before rushing out of the room and his friends and family stand as mute spectators as it is not uncommon in Indian families. This slap becomes the eye-opener not just for Amrita but for many other women in the movie.

There is hardly any resentment in the husband or the family as it was just a solitary slap which happens in almost all families and will happen in future too. Everything around Amrita settles down, her husband starts the next day with the same energy, her mundane humdrum routine at home awaits her and the extended family and friends go about their own work. A slow yet radical transformation starts to build within her. Years of unquestioning contentment in domesticity and her conscious decision to throw her career prospects into the backburner start to singe her.

Her husband uses three defenses to explain his action - that it is the first time that he had raised his hand on his wife, it is as a result of extreme frustration and anger of losing a dream assignment for which he had worked hard and it was not pre-meditated act rather an impulsive slap in the heat of the moment when she intervened to pacify his anger. But nothing convinces the protagonist. She stands defenseless before a greatly cynical and critical family and society. She finds it extremely difficult to make her husband, in-laws, mother, brother and even the female advocate understand that it is, in fact, a violation of a woman's self-respect and dignity. No one has the right to take a woman for granted even her husband. Her advocate cautions her that taking up such an insignificant matter to court can only bring disgrace to her image. But,



Amrita is resolute on an indictment that any act of violence, even a slap, is an infringement of the right of woman and she expects no monetary settlement in return from her husband. The movie ends with Amrita officially separating from her husband through mutual consent while Vikram realises his unfair aggrandisement and profusely apologises to her. Before she parts for good, she takes part in a family pooja for the well-being of the unborn child and seeks the blessings of her in-law, but refuses to forgive anyone who did not stand for her in the family.

7. Right to Dignity of Life

Both the women, the unnamed wife in Kandasamy's story and Amrita of Thappad movie are exceptional with their grit and resolve, but they also need strong agencies to redress their grievances. Their voices should not be silenced for want of a law to punish the transgressor. The trauma and brutality of a wife within closed walls should not go unpunished by gender-oppressive ideology. Every human, be it man or woman, has the right to dignity of life. If there are laws to protect human rights, why has it not applied to wives who undergo such injustice in the hands of their inhuman husbands? Can laws relegate women and protect only the men?

It is high time that the men realise that women are not objects of desire and possession but independent beings with their own likes and dislikes. A match can be made in heaven but it has to be lived according to the laws of the world. Even a spousal transgression is not legitimate or entitled.

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