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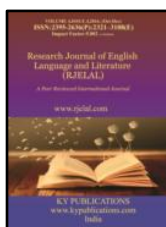
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VIOLENCE AS A SOCIAL AND GENDERED DEBATE: FORMULATION OF A FEMINIST PRAXIS

Dr. MOUSUMI GUHA BANERJEE

Associate Professor & Head

Department of English Literature, The English and Foreign Languages University
Shillong Campus, Shillong-793022



ABSTRACT

Violence, as we see it today, is as much of a social manifestation of an interpersonal relationship that a victim or a group of victims share(s) with the perpetrator, as it may be psychologically underpinned. Individual experiences within cultures, societies and families are primarily social in nature and are varied, contingent upon specific – and again varied – social situations. One aspect of any attempt of a social redefinition of violence would be to look at the way in which it is inflicted on women and is thereafter legitimized as being a normative principle of, or rather a foundation of, patriarchy. What perhaps is overlooked is the fact of the intrinsic aggressiveness of the male perpetrator who has, in a sense, the ‘monopoly’ of action within a domestic framework. Hence, in this paper I would be keen to look at the ways in which practices of patriarchal violence have been categorically gendered and sometimes even strategically normativized as being quintessential to the ‘political ontology of the masculine’. Violence, then, evolves to be a source of validation of a dominant masculinity that, in its turn, seeks to perpetuate it to almost take the form of a coercive social institution. The modern notion of violence may thus be envisaged to entail a structured and systematic form of power that needs to be understood as ‘a dynamic network of relations that always involves rational justifications and invokes resistance, and does not always entail violence’. To put it succinctly, I would be interested to look at the various implications of practices of violence in a society that, more often than not, serves to instrumentalize a gendered reality of male domination as a sovereign imperative, and to attempt a critique of the ‘normative evaluation of societal structures’. It is also pertinent to mention here that the premise of this paper emerges, at the same time, from the fact of an intriguing transformation of a ‘state of domination’ to a condition of human relationships characterized by violence and a stark ‘asymmetrical fixation of power’.

Key Words: Domestic violence, Domination, Patriarchy, Politics, Power, Society, Violence

Violence, as we see it today, is as much of a social manifestation of an interpersonal relationship that a victim or a group of victims shares with the perpetrator, as it may be psychologically

underpinned. Individual experiences within cultures, societies and families are primarily social in nature and are varied, contingent upon specific – and again varied – social situations. It is for this reason that

'[a]ny consideration of violence places one in the midst of much larger questions than the acts of physical violence or of mass destruction which surround us from all sides.' (1) The very question as to what now constitute(s) the very notion and nature of violence is heteroglossic, or in other words in this context multi-semantic, in the sense that it gives birth to a multiplicity of perplexing answers that, in their turn, serve to build up a hegemonic societal structure and, as a result, a coercive social institution. One aspect of any attempt of a social redefinition of violence would be to look at the way in which it is inflicted on women and is thereafter legitimized as being a normative principal of, or rather a foundation of, patriarchy. What perhaps is overlooked is the fact of the intrinsic aggressiveness of the male perpetrator who has, in a sense, the 'monopoly' of action within a domestic framework.

Before delving into the facets of domesticization of the very idea of violence, it would be pertinent to consider and situate the concept in the spatially larger discourses of the political or, more specifically, political power – something which is conveniently wielded when there is an 'unspeakability about violence even while it is ubiquitous'. (2) This element of unspeakability is normally a perceivable outcome of 'social relations, stratification systems, kinship systems, state formations, social conflict, war, and resistance to oppressions'. (3) It is here that Veena Das's and Arthur Kleinman's remark in *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering and Recovery* acquires relevance: '... [e]ven when violence is not present in such dramatic forms, there can be a slow erosion of community through the soft knife of policies that severely disrupt the life worlds of people'. (4) The discourse of the political becomes a necessity when violence remains, or continues to be, in 'the shadow of social analysis' (5), in spite of the fact that social scientists have spoken on the issue. The problematic, in fact, arises when violence is seen as 'a possibility, not a fatality' (6) and is conceived as being at 'the core of political action' or as being 'itself political'. (7) On the other hand, Slavoj Žižek's three-pronged approach to violence, classifying it into subjective violence, systemic violence and symbolic violence (8), is ideologically helpful in

envisaging violence as having an indelible footprint in 'the social psyche and its material contexts'. (9) Another problem of a social context of violence is engendered by an attempt to 'civilize violence where it cannot be eradicated'. (10) The political gains a sinister connotation with a suppression of the voices of the oppressed. As George Vigarello notes in 'L'Invention de la violence morale' in *Sociétés et représentations* 6 (June 1998, p. 186) that, it was 'in the nineteenth century that women and children began to be seen as victims, that society discovered the moral violence that prolongs, accompanies or proceeds physical violence, and that it came to be accepted that pressures and threats mean that "the territory of violence could be expanded to include a brutality that was directly physical"'. (11) In order to raise voices against the apparent unspeakability or 'a certain public visibility' (12), not only did social scientists but also doctors and lawyers, for instance forensic medical examiners like Alexandre Lacassagne and Ambroise Tardieu in France, did play an important role. Significant writers like Comtesse de Ségur and Victor Hugo also contributed to the movement considerably by creating literary characters like the boy in Ségur's *Un Bon Petit Diable* (1865) and Cosetta in *Les Misérables* as well as by writing what may be seen as feminist texts. What emerged to be historically phenomenal was that towards the culmination of the nineteenth century, several Western countries had come to implement laws relating to protection of victimized children. Hence, the existence of the victim as an ontological truth was increasingly being realized – a realization that led to the emergence of the Welfare State. There was born a 'new emphasis' (13) on a certitude against human indignity. When the state recognizes that certain kinds of security systems are needed for human damage and unforeseen accidents, it comes to enforce a legal framework that, in its turn, serves to bring the logic of the suffering victim to the fore. As have been aptly remarked by Renée Zauberman and Philippe Robert: '... the appearance of the victim as the autonomous object of public policies ... is a sort of extension, or new branch, of the Welfare State, but at the same time it comes into conflict with the logic of the penal State'. (14) This anthropological shift

from an act of objectivization to that of subjectivization of the victim was significantly felt through 'massive transformations that put victims centre stage from the 1960s onwards'. (15) The upsurge of women's movements – both feminist and non-feminist – served to cause the woman victim's voice to be heard, as a result of which violence against women came to be 'publicly visible'. (16) This phenomenon helped to do away with the sense of disgrace that was otherwise thought to 'stigmatize' women as victims and that prevented them from confronting it and taking action against it. It was during this time in the 1960s that they 'began to mobilize against the violence they suffered, namely rape, violence inside and outside the family and incest'. (17) This resulted, very importantly, in major changes in the laws of many countries. Hence, the very notion of the victim is perhaps now inseparably related to the idea of the sovereignty of the State – a relationship that may be perceivably felt in the following comment:

The foregrounding of the figure of the victim represents a challenge to the State, whose sovereignty is becoming less important than the defence of actual or potential victims, and which is in danger of being dispossessed or stripped of its essential attributes. It should also be noted that victims often turn to the State, even if they are not its dependents, to demand reparations, and do not necessarily bypass it. That is particularly true of the descendents of the victims of genocide. (18)

What now becomes important here is to consider that violence needs to be subjectivized since this much-too-often gendered debate is sometimes even found to be strategically normativized as being quintessential to the 'political ontology of the masculine'. (19) This startling 'asymmetric fixation of power' leads to a rather undesirable desubjectivization and domination of the 'protagonist' of violence – a problem that classical approaches to violence have, more often than not, served to assert. In an important interview 'The Ethic of Care for Self as a Practice of Freedom', Michel Foucault talks about conditions when

relations of power are transformed into 'a state of domination':

When an individual or a social group manages to block a field of relations of power, to render them impassive and invariable and to prevent all reversibility of movement – by means of instruments which can become economic as well as political or military – we are facing what we can call a state of domination.

This is the danger of power: its perversion until unrecognizability. The moment power leaves its essential properties of being "changeable, reversible and unstable" so that the relation is blocked and made static, we can speak of a state of domination – a state of affairs where an asymmetric fixation of power is installed and the margins of liberty become limited. (20)

The condition of domination of women leads to 'a normative evaluation of societal structures perhaps because of a perceivable inability to change, reverse and make the relationship of power unstable. This continued 'acceptance' of domination had almost historically and somewhat decidedly confirmed their supposed inferiority in the social structures of power and thereby relegated them to the margins of their relationships with men. But again, the question of inability is also something that Foucault here is trying to transcend and is, in the process, seeking to arrive at a more methodological standpoint almost giving birth to a feminist praxis. Hence, the entire phenomenon of domination does not here need to be approached from the point of view of the 'dominator', or 'people who benefit from relations of domination' (21), but needs to be considered rather by means of an inquiry 'into the origins and constituents of domination – not asking "who is dominating" but "why domination, at this particular time and space?" [,] "Which discourses legitimize this relation, how have they come into being, and which possibilities of local resistance do they offer?"' (22) Since for Foucault, 'relations of power are not something bad in themselves, from which one must free one's self' (23), since they can serve to enhance 'our capacities' and develop 'new skills' – capacities that can be 'part of a struggle for

greater freedom' (24) – 'the target is not the possessors of power, because such a mind-set is senseless in the disciplinary-power framework, but rather the very contingencies by which certain strategic relations have come to render some power relations static'. (25) Thus, if 'the applications and strategies of power' (26) are not constantly checked, 'they may indeed deteriorate to violence: the state of domination'. (27)

From the above discussion, it may be so inferred that a Foucauldian approach to violence shows that not only is violence 'contingent and historical' (28), if not conventional, but it is also 'political', if not always 'coincidental'. (29) In such a premise, violence is not something intrinsic to humans. Interpretations of 'domestic violence', for instance, have changed in the sense that it was once conceived as a 'legitimate exercise of patriarchal power within marriage'. Definitions of as social and gendered a phenomenon as domestic violence, then, are in this sense political and 'historically contingent'. (30) It is for this reason that it is important to note that a Foucauldian evaluation of such a form of violence 'recognizes men's violence against women as a structural and systematic aspect of masculinity as it is currently constructed in societies such as our own'. (31) If domestic violence has to be considered within a larger context of the society the following may constitute an apt definition:

[A] logical outcome of relationships of dominance and inequality – relationships shaped not simply by the personal choices or desires of some men to [dominate] their wives but by how we, as a society, construct social and economic relationships between men and women and within marriage (or intimate domestic relationships) and families. Our task is to understand how our response to violence creates a climate of intolerance or acceptance to the force used in intimate relationships. (32)

Thus, the uniqueness of a feminist praxis of violence would lie in the fact of a realization that the dominator-dominated relationship is not always 'unidirectional' and 'repressive' (33) in nature and

would not, as well, necessarily entail any particular form of resistance. Instead, it calls for an understanding of a dynamic at work within the framework of the repressor-repressed equation. But, it is nevertheless also true that the male monopolization of violence today can be pronouncingly felt 'in our cultural practices of violence' that are thus 'highly gendered' (34), so much so that male violence is not even considered as being 'aberrant of gender norms'. (35) Hence, gender is a pre-ordained normative that is 'done' or 'performed' and is constitutive of experiences that almost always refute everything that we 'are' or we would like to think we are. It is this conventionalization of gender as a normative that seeks to perpetuate the political ontology of the masculine – an idea that needs to paradigmatically transformed and confronted with a feminist, if not a 'feminine', resistance. One evident danger of any discourse of violence would be to exclude the 'other' from the entire dialogue and justifying it as being natural and intrinsic to human nature. Any cessation of this dialogue on the possible formulation of a praxis would seriously imperil the whole objective of re-structuring a society that would be able to function on the basis of a genuine exchange and mutual respect. A continuous effort to analyze the practices of violence and the ways in which a convincing form of resistance is possible are some aspects of dealing with the issue of violence with due urgency at the present moment. The issue needs to be de-hierarchized, and a Foucauldian prohibition of power relations being rendered static perhaps needs to be thought about, deliberated on and considered not only in a bid to theorize the present social condition, but to be able to give birth to a discourse that would be judgmentally holistic and ideologically inclusive. Violence, in no form, can afford to be justified and a 'vigorous multi-pronged and multi-professional effort' (36) is the need of the hour to confront it in a way that is probably hitherto unthought-of and is, therefore, unpractised. As Michel Wieviorka appositely remarks in his work *Violence: A New Approach*:

To relate violence to the subject does not, in my view, mean outlining a psychological approach; it is a plea to see violence as an

effort that is made by the subject, or anti-subject, in contexts or situations whose overall dimensions have to be taken into account. I would happily describe those dimensions to be 'total' We have to recognize that violence is more likely to occur when action seems difficult, when social, political, cultural, or interpersonal relations disappear and give way to the logics of rupture and the loss of meaning, and when the construction of relations gives way to a plethora of, for example, metapolitical meanings, to lack, and to the hypersubjectivity of some and the despair of others. (37)

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