

MORAL POLICING AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: PORTRAYAL OF HONOUR AND SHAME IN POILE SENGUPTA'S MANGALAM

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ABSTRACT

Thesis. The article aims to study Poile Sengupta's play entitled *Mangalam* to analyse how the play raises a voice against society's enforced models of masculinity and femininity, and sexual and psychological violence and its impact on women in the domestic sphere.

Concept. The study foregrounds the impact of moral policing via the notions of honour and shame in Sengupta's *Mangalam* and analyses that family, a micro-unit of patriarchy is the primary location of violence inflicted on women. The present study further attempts to examine interpersonal violence perpetuated through the institution of marriage through a study of the portrayal of marital violence in Sengupta's *Mangalam*.

Results and Conclusion. Sengupta presents contemporary social issues and interrogates moral policing and violence perpetuated by patriarchy through the discussed play. It presents a dramatic piece written by a woman, thus challenging



the male-dominated narratives through a voice of protest and addressing violence inflicted on a woman's body and psyche.

Originality. The originality of the study relies on examining the underlying causes of gender-based violence within the institution of marriage and family as the smallest unit of patriarchy while also understanding the relevance of literary representations by women dramatists as resistance literature.

Keywords: Violence, honour, shame, patriarchy, domestic sphere

INTRODUCTION

Honour is acutely associated with respect in society since time immemorial. Honour may be defined as an inclination to abide by morally right decisions which are always under the surveillance of the authority. It is closely linked with the principles and beliefs of a particular group and may vary on the level of familial constraints such as caste or class to that of religion. Any severance of the principles of such a group is often seen as damage to the reputation of such a group in society, which may even lead to cataclysmic consequences for that person. One of those consequences is honour killing which has become a problem which needs grave attention. Under honour killing, the person is punished by murder by the particular group to mend the stain brought upon the honour of the group by the victim. Therefore, honour, stigma, and shame become hefty issues which ought to be discussed to bring a change in society (Alam & Haque, 2021). Incidents of rape, assault, honour-killing, and passive-aggressive comments on women are some examples of violence inflicted on women to police their bodies as well as their psyche. Poile Sengupta, an Indian writer in English, portrays interpersonal violence in the domestic sphere through her play *Mangalam* which is structured as a play within a play to depict the extent of violence in two different settings signifying the agelessness of the subjugated status of women in a patriarchal society. In the context of the present article, these issues will be analysed in order to bring to light the manner in which Sengupta underlines these issues in her plays to stir social change.

Moral policing is a key tool of the patriarchal system to perpetrate violence, physical or psychological, to maintain the smooth functioning of the system. By using honour and shame as primary tools of subjugation and generating consent, patriarchy sustains by strengthening its hold upon the agency of the marginalised sections of society. Violence and moral policing of women have been presented through various forms of art to protest and underline the outrage against such instances of interpersonal violence. In the Indian context, women writers have analysed instances of cultural policing and patriarchal manoeuvres in the domestic and public realm in their plays. The relevance of addressing women's oppression is contemporary as they face such gender-based violence, physical and psychological, even today. The molestation of women and ignorance towards their

safety has been widely criticised and it caused widespread outrage when a woman was gang-raped and brutally assaulted with an iron rod by six men on a moving bus on 16 December 2012 in India (*Nirbhaya case: Four Indian men executed for 2012 Delhi bus rape and murder*, 2020). The victim succumbed to injuries two weeks later “after widespread protests that demanded India to reckon with its treatment of women” (*Nirbhaya case: Four Indian men executed for 2012 Delhi bus rape and murder*, 2020). The case enraged the masses and culminated into protests which are still in movement due to the incidents reported even today as exemplified by the brutal gang-rape of a female veterinarian in Hyderabad who was burned alive after the rape by four men in November 2019 (Khan, 2019).

In society, certain norms are followed to ensure the smooth functioning of the system. This is made possible through various institutions which keep the individual in check so that he/she becomes a part of the society for its collective good. Among the various tactics employed for the formation of such a society, marriage as an institution plays a significant role to provide a balance in order to maintain the functions of socialisation and reproduction, which are traditionally termed as the central functions of the family. According to Kate Millett “marriages are financial alliances, and each household operates as an economic entity, much like a corporation” (1970, p. 36, 1970). Since family is the smallest unit which is the beginning of conditioning through patriarchal thought-system, anything causing hindrance in such a process is held culpable and, therefore, is forced to face adverse ramifications. In many instances, wife battery and murder occur when women protest or even slightly react against the unjust treatment they face after marriage. Seeking husband’s permission before leaving the house is also common in rural areas and in some urban conservative families. Also, in many cases women are forbidden to work outside after marriage as it dishonours the reputation of the family, while many families seek prospective brides who are unemployed or have had meagre education so that they can be easily domesticised and would look after household chores and take care of the young. Men often choose women who are less-educated than them so that they can nurture their inferiority complex by subjugating women via condescension and making sure that they stay beneath men. This also applies to men who are threatened by women who earn more than them or are at a higher position than them. According to Stevi Jackson:

At the level of social structure gender is a hierarchical relation, constitutive of social men and social women, sustained through divisions of labour and other means, notably the heterosexual marriage contract. Here, gender intersects with institutionalised heterosexuality, bolstered by law, the state, and social convention. (2001, p. 289)

The day-to-day violence experienced by women is endless. For women, domestic violence, psychological violence, insults and hurdles suffered in

the workplace constitute physical and sexual, as well as mental harassment. A woman is beaten for not cooperating with the husband. In some instances, she is burnt to death for not bringing enough dowry from her family. She is forced for sexual intercourse, and the perpetrator stands un-accused because marital rape is still not considered a crime in India. Furthermore, women often internalise assault as the norm within the domestic threshold due to generations of instillation of such norms on moral grounds. They are reluctant in taking action or speaking out against the violence. They are silenced, and this silence is cultivated from the moment she takes birth.

At this juncture, it is necessary to bring to light the detrimental effects of harassment, physical or psychological, on the mind of the individual who is stuck amid adverse circumstances. In society, people living on the margins suffer as a result of downright aggression at the hands of their perpetrators who exist at the centre of the dominant position. A woman may suffer from harassment at the hands of her spouse, parent, in-law, boss, co-worker, or a stranger. In India, incidents of cruelty against women by husband and/or in-laws are social evils which have been reported in the media on a large scale. However, it is not a rare sight to realise that many such incidents remain unreported, either due to the pressure exerted on the woman by the husband and/or in-laws to keep silent about the cruelties committed against her, the shame felt by women of staining the honour of the family, their sacrifice for their children to have an unbroken home, or the failure of the Police to file the First Information Report (officially abbreviated as FIR). Therefore, this paper is an attempt to unfold such layers of women's oppression and analyse the influence of the notions of honour and shame in their lives as underlined by Sengupta's play entitled *Mangalam*.

Nandi Bhatia, in *Performing Women/Performing Womanhood: Theatre, Politics, and Dissent in North India* (2010), gives a detailed account of the role women have played in transforming theatre and paving the way for questioning of accepted gender roles. Bhatia highlights that women are equal partakers who have been involved in debates on nationalism and social reform, that public world of politics is inseparable from the private worlds of women, and that there are deeply entrenched relations between gender, colonialism, political dissent, and theatre. Anita Singh and Tarun Tapas Mukherjee (2013) provide an insight into women's writings in the sphere of theatre from different parts of India through their book *Gender, Space and Resistance: Women and Theatre in India*. The book deliberates on issues pertaining to the journey of struggle and resistance which women in theatre have experienced throughout their endeavours in the public domain of theatre tracing their socio-political, psychological, and economic issues through their works. The anthology provides a detailed insight into the research which has taken place in women's theatre in India focusing on societal issues, a questioning of gender binaries, and women's agency and identity as it explores their contribution to the recorded history of Indian theatre. Furthermore, Sengupta's collection of plays entitled *Women centre*

stage: The dramatist and the play (2014) is an important addition to the arena of theatre as it delves deeper into the issues concerning women's position in society while further enriching the field of Indian writing in English. The underlying themes in her works present physical, sexual and psychological violence against women as burning issues and compel the reader to adopt a feminist lens to see the society (Alam et al. 2021).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of the present study is to highlight the gender-based violence against women in India. The study will try to accentuate the situation of women inside and outside the domestic threshold. The research is focused:

- To understand sexual and psychological violence and its impact on women in the domestic sphere;
- To identify the underlying causes of gender-based violence within the institution of marriage;
- To study the manner in which literary representations interrogate moral policing and violence perpetuated by patriarchy;
- To analyse Sengupta's *Mangalam* as representative of resistance literature;
- To establish Sengupta as a prominent playwright through her critique of contemporary issues.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study will try to explore the following research questions. It is an attempt to answer the important aspects of the lived experiences of women in India. The research has tried to answer why, after years of independence, crime and violence against women still exists inside and outside of the household, with reference to the selected play.

- How is violence against women in the domestic sphere a marker of masculinity?
- Why is honour as a notion often used as a tool for disciplining women?
- What are the factors causing gender-based violence in marital relationships?
- In what ways does literature interrogate contemporary social issues?
- How does Sengupta's *Mangalam* exhibit resistance?
- How is Sengupta as a female playwright contributing to the critical corpus of contemporary Indian drama?

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Indian drama has become an important area of research to elucidate the contribution of theatre in consciousness-raising and presenting a critique of society. However, there is a dearth of research that focuses on women

theatre practitioners in the context of contemporary Indian drama. The relevance of this study thus lies in a detailed study of *Mangalam* by Sengupta. Her progressive stance on theatre has thoroughly helped in creating a space for women in Modern Indian drama. A close reading and analysis will aid in weighing themes and pertinent issues highlighted by the playwright. It will allow the researcher to illuminate the issues of social relevance taken up by the playwright and the manner in which she interrogates the accepted gender roles in society through the play.

ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT: POILE SENGUPTA'S MANGALAM

Sengupta is an Indian playwright who has written columns for children and plays which have earned critical acclaim. Her plays are mainly centred on women's concerns. Her plays such as *Mangalam*, *Alipha*, *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha*, *So Said Shakuni*, and *Inner Laws* introspect upon varying social issues and their effect on people. While *Mangalam*, a play within a play highlights that the social status of women is only marginally different in rural and urban setting in terms of the private sphere, the play *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha*, *So Said Shakuni* is significant in its portrayal of the theme of revenge and the repercussions of expressing desire through the merging of epical characters of Shakuni from *The Mahabharata* and Shoorpanakha from *The Ramayana*. In *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha*, *So Said Shakuni*, Sengupta reconsiders the myth of Shoorpanakha from *Ramayana* and Shakuni from *The Mahabharata* in which they meet as modern-day travellers at the airport. The character of Shoorpanakha through Sengupta's retelling of the incident in *Thus Spake* allows us to see a humanised fragment of the devilish characters of the epics. The audience gets to hear Shoorpanakha's perspective unlike the silenced voice in the epic. She expresses her agony as she remembers being tossed between Rama and Lakshmana and humiliated as if she did not deserve any self-respect for the reason that she expressed her desire for a man. On the other hand, *Inner Laws* explores inter-personal relationships shared by women in familial surroundings, while also serving as an example of refashioning epics by employing a satirical approach creating a mythological association with the contemporary characters.

Mangalam won a special prize for the burning issues presented through its socially relevant theme in the Hindu Madras Players play scripts competition in 1993. First performed in January 1993 at Guru Nanak Bhavan, Bangalore by Mahesh Dattani's theatre group, Playpen, the play ponders upon domestic violence and girl child abuse. It was published in Sengupta's collection of plays entitled *Women Centre Stage* in 2010. The play is divided into two acts, through the technique play within a play "to show how from 1960 to the modern cosmopolitan family, nothing seems to have changed. Structures of oppression are replicated" (Singh & Mukherjee, 2013, p. 610). It should be noted, however, that there is a link that is formed between the

two acts as the events of abuse begin to mirror each other, Mangalam as a victim of rape and Sumati as a victim of female child abuse. The spectators of the first act, i.e. the play within a play depicting Mangalam's story, become the characters in the second act. The play begins after Mangalam's funeral rites have been completed and the play unfolds as we get an insight into her tumultuous life through the upheaval between the characters in the household. Over the course of the play, it is revealed that Mangalam committed suicide. Thangam, her sister, accuses Dorai, Mangalam's husband of his mistreatment of her and physical and psychological violence that he perpetrated on her when she was alive. Mangalam was pregnant when she got married to Dorai, information which was withheld from Dorai who keeps on abusing her throughout her life to extort this information from her:

DORAI: For three months I did not know, for three months. ... She used to hide everything from me, the vomiting, everything. Then it began to show ... even then, I never suspected ... till the doctor came. If my mother was alive, she would have known why the rich Ramachandra Iyer was tying his daughter to me. But my father ... poor man ... was completely fooled. He cried with happiness .. he said (Goddess) Lakshmi had blessed him at last ... he treated this whore as if she were a goddess.

THANGAM: Don't you dare call my sister by that name again. Don't you dare.

DORAI: So what should I call her? A *devi*? A virgin goddess? She came to me after being used, she was somebody else's leavings. (Sengupta, 2019, pp. 33-34)

Here, a woman is reduced to her body and objectified as Dorai's words indicate here that Mangalam's role in his life is reduced to nothing because she had become "somebody else's leavings", in loose terms, 'damaged goods'. The issue of shame is again brought into the argument as Dorai further places the blame upon her father as well, thus highlighting that the families of victims tend to suffer too as they are also not spared by society in the act of shaming. This also highlights that he makes it a point to insult Mangalam's father in order to question his ownership of her, i.e. how could he pass over a piece of property which contained defects, and hence he was deceived by him. The violence inflicted on a woman's body and psyche is further revealed as Thangam and Dorai clash:

THANGAM: You could have left her. She would have lived a happier life.

DORAI: How could I have left her? Her father was in complete control of my life, he got me a job, he paid for my sister's marriage, he looked after my father in his last days. I did not even have to pay the doctor's fees.

THANGAM: So you stayed with her because of your greed for money. You stayed with her so that you could punish her every minute of her life. You mocked her and taunted her, you tortured her. I have seen the marks of your hands on her body. I have seen your nail marks.

DORAI: She would not tell me who the father was. First I used to ask her softly, sweetly. She would not tell me. Then I beat her. she stayed quiet. She would not even cry out in pain. She was so obstinate, that ... that ... Then it became a game to see how I could take it out of her. ... (Pause.) She never told me. (Sengupta, 2019, p. 34)

Dorai's abuse of Mangalam becomes evident in the manner he clearly admits that this idea of extortion of the name of the man responsible for Mangalam's pregnancy becomes a sport for him. Dorai impregnated her again and again to punish her as Revathi, the daughter-in-law states, "he gave her children year after year so that he could see her suffer. Every night, he made her suffer. Even when the doctor said no" (p. 31).

It should be noted here that Mangalam's pregnancy at the time of her wedding was a result of rape. However, it is revealed later in the play that the perpetrator was her sister Thangam's husband who raped her when she was left alone with him for a few minutes while Thangam visited the temple. Thangam was aware that her husband was the perpetrator but she chose to conceal the truth to escape the shame and save the honour of her family by letting her sister become the scapegoat, even though now she feels guilty. This revelation provides an insight into the way patriarchy functions by making its way into women's lives through internalisation of its norms where with honour and shame become larger than life and a woman's life is devalued. Such a woman is found standing past these lines of acceptance, often without proof as women are often held culpable by nature as Adrienne Rich in 'Women and Honour: Some Notes on Lying' (1977) argues how men have labelled women as the repository of honour through the concepts of chastity, virginity and fidelity while also accusing them of intrinsic qualities of deceit among other things:

Truthfulness has not been considered important for women, as long as we have remained physically faithful to a man, or chaste.

We have been expected to lie with our bodies: to bleach, redden, unkink or curl our hair, pluck eyebrows, shave armpits, wear padding in various places or lace ourselves, take little steps, glaze finger and toe nails, wear clothes that emphasised our helplessness. We have been required to tell different lies at different times, depending on what the men of the time needed to hear. (Rich, 1997, p. 412)

In Act-two, it is through the technique of play within a play of the narrative that the events unfold as the spectators of Mangalam-the play in the first act become characters in the second act. Understanding the impact of the gender-based violence suffered by Mangalam in the first act, a young woman Sumati's past flashes in front of her revealing a history of abuse that she suffered at the hands of her Uncle Nari, who keeps on molesting Sumati who is in mid-twenties, as is revealed in the play:

SUMATI: (*Off.*) No! Uncle! No! (SUMATI *rushes in through the garden door.*)
Appa! Appa ... (*She breaks down sobbing as VIKRAM, SURESH and RADHA
come running in through the inner door.*)

THANGAM: Sumati! What has happened? Amma! Sumati!

NARI *enters in a rush through the garden door. He stops short.*

The light focusses on him. He is dishevelled, out of breath.

VIKRAM: You bastard! (*Lunges forward. SURESH restrains him.*). (Sengupta, 2019, p. 69)

The play underlines the systemic violence in a society which only validates the male experience while it conveniently side-lines the lived experiences of the female. Thus, honour and shame correlate as the abuse that accompanies these concepts highlights women as the repository of chastity, fidelity, innocence, fragility and silence:

SUMATI: Amma, I know what you feel about my working. But I have to fight for myself. Appa is right. He knows so much more about the world than you do. He realises that I have to face life *my way*, with whatever weapons I have.

THANGAM: You think they have to be weapons all the time?

SUMATI: I think so. A woman who allows herself to be soft, who relinquishes her weapons ... well she gets chewed up, doesn't she? ... I know it's a terrible expression but then it's a terrible state to be in ...

THANGAM: Yes, I know. (Sengupta, 2019, p. 66)

This exchange between Sumati and her mother Thangam provides an insight into the psychological trauma that has resulted from the years of child sexual abuse that Sumati endured. In addition, Thangam's affirmation of Sumati's point of view needs to be further contextualised. In the scene before this exchange between the mother-daughter duo, the readers/spectators find that Thangam's husband Sreeni is engaged in an extramarital affair as she discovers a love letter addressed to him in one of the books from the shelf. At this juncture, the relationship between Sumati's parents turns dysfunctional. Thangam's agreement with Sumati's perspective thus highlights the trauma and pressures associated with the institution of marriage and the precarious situation of a woman in a man's world. The values associated with such a system help strengthen norms that are perpetuated to mould the female sex according to the set criteria of a patriarchal system that facilitates moral policing and encourages gender-based violence when they turn astray. Such notions are cultivated to perpetuate a cultural policing of women's bodies and psyche. Women are targeted through gender-based violence through such socially constructed concepts of honour and shame.

Kamla Bhasin's *Understanding Gender* (2000) comments on the discrimination faced by women in both domestic and public sphere:

Women as a group are considered inferior to men. They enjoy fewer rights, control fewer resources, work longer hours than men but their work is either undervalued or underpaid. They face systemic violence at the hands of men and society; and they have little decision-making power in social, economic and political institutions. (Bhasin, 2000, pp. 5-6)

This suggests that patriarchy has always undervalued the female experience and validated that of the male. It is a stark reality which one faces in a society as it legitimises honour-killings and severe atrocities by elevating false ideals and setting them as the foundation of human relationships. At this juncture, the playwright highlights that the struggles and interventions in the dominant discourse are necessary to disrupt the unequal distribution of power which is often inclined towards the male domain. In *Mangalam*, Sengupta brings forth the essentially fragmented identity of women who go through violence and molestation despite the difference between the rural and urban setting of the two acts to highlight that the advancement in terms of technology and education in the guise of a modern society has not been able to resolve the unchanged oppressed status of woman. She states in an interview,

The technique of alienation that I used in *Mangalam* was part of the basic design to indicate that the world of domestic oppression and pain knows no socio-economic boundary and [extends] across time. The technique of distancing actually allows the fusion of the two worlds of the play. (Singh, 2013, p. 617)

Mangalam and *Sumati* represent those women who become social misfits struggling to adjust as victims of sexual violence and molestation in the familial shackles as the playwright tries to bring into scrutiny the subjection of a woman's identity which is utterly fragmented in the private sphere.

The patriarchally imposed notions of honour, shame and stigma have been interrogated by Sengupta in her works to examine the consequences of such perceptions which are propagated by patriarchy to censor desire and sexuality (Singh, 2020). Women are gas-lighted for ascertaining control over their bodies and psyche when they resist being tamed by their male counterparts. It is for the sake of the upper caste family's honour that *Mangalam* and *Sumati* keep silent after the history of violence and abuse as their bodies become sites of violence. It is due to the metaphorical stain that one is able to decipher the impact of the echo of the stigmas associated with various tabooed issues in society in the Indian context, such as love, sex, desire, menstruation, rape, child abuse, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), abortion, pregnancies out of wedlock and extramarital relationships, divorce, same-sex relationships among others.

Stigma formulates and strengthens taboo. Such stigmas affect lives of women in the form of rejection of marriage proposals, broken engagements, suicide, and discord in marital relationships leading to divorce or exile from the family altogether. This can also be explained in the context of the stigmas related to rape-victims, physically or mentally challenged

people, and the families of such people that are treated differently by society resulting in labelling them as people who need to be concealed from or to be cast away from society. This concept of shame associated with any stigma can be explained as a stain attributed to such issues as represented here, which is the cause of oppression of women at various levels.

CONCLUSION

Sengupta's writing makes an important statement. It adds to the contested space of a male-dominated arena of writing and performance. Helene Cixous in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' mentions that the written word has been considered the repository of men for long in order to exclude women from entering the public sphere and exerting their agency. Cixous's Medusa is amused and laughing at the fear attached to the female body in the male-dominated arena of writing. She postulates that the otherness attributed to their bodies should be embraced and explored by utilising that difference to interrogate the dichotomies of sex, sexuality, and gender. Sengupta's *Mangalam* does the same, and, in turn highlights writing as a political act that can facilitate women in rewriting their experiences, which have been narrated by men and filtered for long. This is to emphasise that, a study of the contribution of women theatre practitioners presents similarities in their shared perspectives towards concerns, themes and experimentation with playwriting and performances (Singh, 2021). Their creative responses correspond as they penetrate into the contemporary issues and question the ambivalent attitude often portrayed towards them by their male counterparts. They tend to present the characters with a more humane portrayal as they are motivated by lived experiences during the process of writing, directing, and acting. Ranging from the issues of gender-based violence through rape, dowry deaths, and wife-battery, challenging imposed virtues perpetuated through traditional narratives, and breaking stigma around mental illness and other pertinent issues; their works abound in a critique of social ills and taboos. The pull between the personal and the political is constantly felt and examined in their works. This highlights that contemporary Indian drama is being enriched by the contribution of these women as they endeavour to create new works and portray woman as the speaking subject (Sharma & Singh, 2022).

Sengupta's critical corpus presents contemporary social issues and interrogates moral policing and violence perpetuated by patriarchy through the play. *Mangalam* presents strong female characters who are not victims but survivors as the playwright describes Sumati as "sad faced but definitely not a martyr" (Sengupta, 2019, p. 39). The play intervenes in the dominant discourse by presenting a dramatic piece written by a woman, thus challenging the male-dominated narratives, and addressing violence inflicted on a woman's body and psyche. Women are using art to express dissent

and articulation of their voices. The phallogocentric canon is being challenged by women who are writing and presenting the lived experiences as opposed to the male counterparts who have always spoken for them. Sengupta becomes a major contributor to the dramatic canon through expressions of strains of resistance by incorporating the complexities of the female experience and providing a critique of pertinent social issues.

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