

## STRANDS OF MISOGYNY : WITCH-HUNTING

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On one hand India has come a long way in ending the social evils practiced against women. It was made sure that the centuries of oppression meted out to women should be resolutely dealt with, and yes we do witness the obvious outcomes too in this direction. However, a nation like ours would never agree to the fact that our rich social culture has never been truly inclusive for women. Notwithstanding inclusiveness, after all there have been both enumerated and un-enumerated behavioral traits and standards that women ought to conform to, to fit into the ideal imagery as conceived by the society and its inherent ideology.

Women have been glorified, praised and placed on the pedestals since centuries to be “Devi” (goddess), “Ghar ki Izzat” (pride of home) and such name callings that push it on them to remain enmeshed in the box of standards and contain them in the box itself.

Subsequently, what happens when they try to peep, jut out or most significantly try to step out of this box of conformist standards? The answer to the question is not only easy to comprehend but is also easy to digest by the majority of people. It is here, that is, the deviation from the glass ceiling throw them open and liable to being slut shamed, witch hunted, isolated, vilified and what not.

In the upshot, we regress immediately into the larger tapestry of patriarchal biases from which we had carved our way out to a so called progressive world. We take no time to fall back into the same old frame of pointing fingers out at women believing them to be the sole culprit in the larger circumstances of events be it any, beyond reasoning.

It feels deeply saddening then, that our awareness, wisdom and consciousness have not progressed at a pace with which we as a nation have progressed at achieving varied institutional developments.

The gaze that we place on women for failing to live up to the defined norms reflect on the systemic misogyny that refuses to transform itself over ages. Consequently, we as a nation seem to be failing on the empowerment discourse where we brag to ourselves of having worked amply on the awareness drive, being inclusive of even the marginalized community of women, and spreading education towards the prevailing gender biases so to break the culture of silence, head on, around gender based social ills.

The social evil of witch hunting leading to abandoning of women that was once largely prevalent and pervasive in the social life and culture of Bengal seems to have renewed in a completely new fashion, attire and form gradually tip-toeing into the modern constitutional system.

Of late certain events in the country clearly inference and visibly demonstrate inter alia how the traces of witch hunting and accompanied harassment are easily traversing their ways into the, and, affecting the life of even the modern, independent and empowered women, rendering them helpless. They are left to grapple by themselves through the mounting circumstances of being convicted even before lawfully proven guilty of the offence.

It was earlier in 2020, that I happened to audience a theatre performance, a play, a narrative entitled “Bayan” (abandoned) directing the attention

of the spectators towards the social practice and evil of out casting women with no enlisting support from anyone in the community or village or people at large.

Revealing snippets of the story, the narrative and its plot take place and revolve around the larger set up of rural life and culture in Bengal. The protagonist happens to be a simple, hardworking girl, an empowered version of her own kind, living an independent life and making a living through the profession of burying the dead. Soon in her life she meets a man of her community who expresses his love to her and desires a wedlock with her to which she approves of willingly. What happens later in the plot is that the association of the woman with the man turns out to be nightmarish for the rest of her life where she eventually dies. She is allegedly framed and implicated in a crime, declared as an offender, out casted from the community, barred from taking up her occupation and abandoned to live in the forest with no means of livelihood. Even a sight of her is considered hateful and open to all possible forms of mockery, rebuke, violence and abuse. She stands declared as a “man eater” witch (Dayan) who deserves nothing but hatred. Also the allies in defense and rescue face the same rebukes, are deterred from standing up to the popular perception. Eventually, begging and pleading people of mercy she finally breaks down in surrender.

The narrative makes it obvious that the popular mindset of making women easy targets, pushing them into vulnerability, heaping insults on them, compulsively making them helpless, dissecting their character, wherein every person gets a self-proclaimed judging right have been deeply permeable at all time in the society.

However, what makes us recall this narrative is its significance that lays in the fact that even after centuries down the line, the right of every man to be the best judge of the actions of others still comes handy with women being the easiest prey to this judgmental power of the society. Even in the contemporary twenty first century the aforementioned narrative congruent well with the

turn of events taking place and currently being witnessed pertaining to women witch hunting leading to a grave form of harassment in the country.

It reflects a standpoint where our culture still takes pride to villainize women more than it would villainize men for emotional abuse, molestation and sexual assault. It seems that the age old practice we believe to have become redundant now revamps in a new light.

The much talked about death by suicide of an actor and consequently accompanied by it the complete ripping off of the public image of an actress associated with him well in advance of her being proven guilty by the concerned institutions, their processes and mechanisms, demonstrate on the fact that we still put on crass lenses when it comes to labeling women as the sole trouble-makers.

We ought to have a close look at the incident to understand how the culture and the process of witch hunting is fully alive in the times when we have all the tools of fundamental rights and human rights readily available at our disposal. At the same time it also feels that regardless of the written rights we have been provided to by the law of the land, the self-proclaimed unwritten rights of the society to be grossly abusive of others being the best just of their actions, at times, override the written ones. At least in the case being talked about here is so visible and evident.

It was just a few months ago that there was a shocking news airing everywhere of death by suicide of a young Bollywood actor. The untimely demise believed to be by suicide immediately stirred up the talks about nepotism and how the practice is leading to threaten the mental health of the people who are not the industry aboriginals. In short, there are people from outside the industry who are facing discriminatory practices from the ones who are well established in the business and claim its territorial possessions.

However just in sometime springs anew a debate where the actor’s romantic relationship is

brought to light claiming it to be the only cause of instigating him to suicide where his girlfriend is charged for his abetment to suicide. While the debate over nepotism and its power to affect mental health settles down in no time, the tussle and odds of the romantic relationship that allegedly emerges largely and often exclusively from the behavioral patterns of women eventually established itself over all other discourses. The misogynistic expanse gets to an extent where even prior to the court of law doing its part, the emotional media trials, the people all over the social networking sites and their passionate outbursts are trying their best to spread it unilaterally that the woman in the said context was an “opportunistic girlfriend” who was too quick to move in with a man with whom she had started a relationship just a while ago. The accusations like her being a gold digger who had a complete access of her boyfriend’s financial possessions such as credit cards etc., being responsible for keeping her man away from his family and surprising of all being the one who was “drugging him” without him being aware of it, trying black magic on him are looming large in whole spectrum of information.

Such conversations and revelations touch new horizons of misogyny when the opinions and arguments standing up to gender biasness are turned down being considered irrational and inhuman while the ones that embrace witch hunting are rationalized. The voices pro hatred are embraced while the anti-hatred are preempted unequivocally.

Inevitably, we see that from history to present those popular voices that put all the onus of bearing the cultural flag on women to be the best version of an “ideal woman” have so overridden the ones that suggest of women empowerment as an idea that normalizes a society’s gaze towards something as basic as her existence.

Falling short of any of the ideal standards a woman is vulnerable and open to humiliation, getting mobbed, witch hunted and isolated. Consequently, in such circumstances where women are perceived to be deviating from the glass ceiling, we quite often get to see the different dimension of society’s modus operandi. We witness how the

society, system and its lawful pillars in their vulturous avatar leave no opportunity unavailing to eat away at even the last layer of flesh of a woman’s dignity and character.

We observe that not only has the woman who fails to live up to society’s expectations faced condemnation, accusations and abuses, but also the allies in the fight against injustice on her, equal and parallel, get demonized and out casted . In the context being referred to here, the justice seeking fraternity asking for maintaining basic protocols of the treatment being meted out to the actress is no less villainized and vilified.

Among numerous instances, to quote one for example is the one where a renowned journalist gets hounded, defamed and harassed horrendously for coming out in support of the actress. She places the abuses hurled at her publicly where one can see how she’s been targeted for her religion, for being anti-national and bags all unparliamentarily words for rising in support of a female being witch hunted and hence boycotted. She presents these abuses thrown at her openly so to present a sample of what bumps you have to endure when you choose the road less travelled by. The upshot being that the voices of dissent have no safe haven.

Conclusively, the pertinently implicit question in the larger frame of discourse remains what precisely does it take for people to gauge a woman’s existential graph from being on the highest point of “DEVI” (goddess) to falling down to the lowest point of “DAYAN” (witch) with no in between.

Probably, “being woman is enough” is the only answer to the said question.

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