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THERE WHERE THEY ARE LOST: GENDER, PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE AND PLACELESSNESS IN KIRAN RAO'S 'LAAPATAA LADIES (2023)' AND V. SHANTARAM'S 'AMAR JYOTI (1936)'

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Abstract:

All forms of violence have a psychological effect. Psychological violence in its absolute form is executed by using certain methods like isolation, confinement, withholding information, disinformation, or threatening behavior. Patriarchal narratives, beginning with Hesiod, where the primordial being Gaia is portrayed as a conspirator of Cronus, in the murder of Uranus, to the creation of a 'beautiful evil' who brings forth the 'Pandora's jar' to introduce countless plagues unto the world, to the birth of Eve whose forbidden act invites the curse of labor upon men, to Helen who causes the downfall of Troy, portray females as the femme fatale. Literature, language and history put women at marginal, subordinate and arbitrary space, which confines them psychologically. In Kiran Rao's movie Manju Mai calls out male narratives a 'fraud' while V. Shantaram's movie hints at the slavery of a married woman. The paper shall analyse these two movies to understand how women are conditioned into various stereotypical feminine roles for centuries, through admonition, exclusion, and misinformation. It shall underline the psychological violence women are subject to in a society run by men.

Keywords: *patriarchy*, *psychological violence*, *narrative*, *Laapataa Ladies*, *Amar Jyoti*, *gender*

"All violence consists in some people forcing others, under threat of suffering or death, to do what they do not want to do."

— Leo Tolstoy**,** *The Law of Love and the Law of Violence*

Violence is one of the things that prevail in men's dealing with the population of their opposite sex, that is, women, in the society. Throughout the collected, documented and recorded history of the humo sapience one can witness violence against women in every stage of evolution. Women have been barred from education, inheritance and even the rights on their progeny until the advent of feminism that turned the patriarchal society upside down by claiming an identity and autonomy for the so-called second sex. Amongst the Greek mythology the narrative of the creation of the universe depicts Uranus violating his primal mate Gaia, in Ovid's Metamorphoses even the daughter of immortals become victims of the lust of Apollo. Proserpina's class hierarchy in being the Roman goddess of springtime and fertility as the Daughter of Ceres and Jupiter fails to provide her any security or protection against the deity of wealth, and agriculture, Pluto. She has been kidnapped and kept imprisoned until she agrees to marry king and become the queen of the underworld. In Homer's text Iphigenia is sacrificed by her father, King Agamemnon, to appease the goddess Artemis and secure favorable winds for the Greek fleet sailing to Troy. Literature abounds in such examples of various kinds of violence against women playing different roles in family or society or the cosmos: a partner betraying the female, the suitor demeaning a maiden and a father beguiling his daughter. Not just in the ancient times, but modern and post-modern age as well we find women struggling and suffering and compromising in order to survive a life they are destined to. But men hardly understood the pain of women until they themselves were subjugated, exploited and humiliated by the imperialist process of colonization. It was through the wife of John Adams (2nd U.S. President) and mother of John Quincy Adams (6th U.S. President) who famously pleaded her husband to "remember the ladies." In a 1776 letter to her husband, she argued that the new laws of the nation should not put "unlimited power into the hands of the husbands." Carrie Chapman Catt's 1917 claim that "woman suffrage is inevitable," a reality with the composition of the Declaration of Independence. Inspired by her predecessors, Mary Wollstonecraft pioneers the discussion on gender discrimination in her seminal work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). She criticizes that gender differences that through socialization, which segregates the populace in terms of how an individual presents themselves, through clothing, physical representation and means of expression. Wollstonecraft underlines that the society because of the natural/ biological differences in sex designates different attributes to women and men, creating social norms in the process (like standards of behavior or dress code). These social norms eventually become cultural mores through naturalization when a female is brought up, groomed and educated in a certain set of skills and mannerisms. She is conditioned to speak softly, to beautify herself, to be sensible and to be alluring by learning the arts of singing and dancing; whereas a boy is taught to be assertive, strong, reserve and authoritative. He is tutored to become

economically independent. This construction of gender, Wollstonecraft asserts, establishes a hierarchy that privileges men and subordinates women. Then comes John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), the groundbreaking 19th-century philosopher and member of Parliament who strongly championed women's rights. He underlined that the legal subordination of women was unjust, detrimental to human growth, and ought to be replaced by "perfect equality." In his 1869 work *The Subjection of Women*, Mill made the case for women's right to vote, access to education, and equal standing within marriage, contending that empowering women was crucial for the advancement of society.

Following on Wollstonecraft's footsteps some feminists rooted in structuralist anthropology, delved into "various efforts to locate moments or structures within history or culture that establish gender hierarchy (Butler 70)." Judith Butler is one of them. Inspired by Wollstonecraft's writings, Butler, in Gender Trouble (1990), challenges the notion of gender as a fixed identity. She writes, gender norms are created through performativity, where performativity is "a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body" (Butler 14-15). Gender norms are perpetuated through repeated actions. Gender is assigned to individuals in the context of their bodies to produce 'culturally Constructed body (Butler 130),' and this is naturalized through dissemination, acceptance and repetition. The contemporary trend of 'gender-reveal party' is an instant of this where a definitive color is celebrated to be the choice of a yet unborn child. Not only that, after the birth of the child, they shall be encouraged, trained and conditioned into following the gender norms – all of which leads to normative violence. Rather than questioning why a girl has to like red or pink color, here the whole socio-cultural life will be pre-destined based on their gendered-body. Such social acts violate the rights of the individuals to choose or to be. Once born, they are encouraged to take on certain traits that fit into the heterosexual hierarchy. This makes it easier to maintain a stable and productive family unit. This western socialization of gender is eventually forced upon the world, primarily through literature and secondarily through cultural-linguistic encounters.

The 'New Testament' recounts how humanity's fall was cause when Eve ate from the forbidden tree, leading God to curse humans. Similarly, Helen, renowned as the most beautiful woman in Rome, abandons her husband and elopes with Paris, ultimately initiating the Trojan War. These canonical consistently portray women as sources of treachery, betrayal, misery, and suffering. Such narratives texts:

a) foster self-doubt, undermine confidence, and instill excessive caution in women.

b) construct a discourse that positions women as the sensitive, fragile, and submissive counterparts to rational, strong, and dominant men.

The impact of these literary works on female readers cannot be any different from that of Judith Butler, who recounts her psychological trauma in *Gender Trouble (1990)*. She reflects on childhood experiences of the violence embedded in gender norms. Her uncle was persecuted for having a, as she refers to in the "Preface (1999)", 'anatomically atypical body (Butler 18-19)', he was isolated from family and friends, only to be confined to a mental asylum. She relates that her homosexual cousins were ousted from their homes, whether real or perceived; she reminisces her own coming out at age 16 resulted to a tumultuous adulthood characterized by lost jobs, lovers, and homes. Butler describes these experiences as "normative violence (Butler 19)" upon her psyche. This normative violence entails to 'a suspension of life, or a sustained death sentence (Butler 19)', leading to landscape of loss, bereavement and solitude. Gender norms produce normative violence. It is a kind of gender-based violence enacted against people who do not confirm to gender norms. A person of any gender, other than the heterosexual male can be a victim of such normative violence. However, majority of its victims are women. Normative violence instills self-doubt and develops inferiority complex, thereby affecting victims psychologically.

Psychological violence is one form of normative violence. Samuel Perreault writes about the gender-based violence: "the violence that some people experience as a result of their gender or gender identity is not limited to criminal acts (Benoît et al. 2015). Certain behaviours that do not meet the threshold of a criminal act can nevertheless have significant negative consequences for those who experience them, in addition to contributing to the perpetuation of discriminatory stereotypes. For example, unwanted sexual attention or close contact, or inappropriate sexual comments received in person or online, can negatively affect a person's sense of security or limit their activities (Bastomski and Smith 2017) (Perreault 4). Perreault here refers to what can be called psychological violence. It is a kind of trauma to the victim caused by threats, or coercive techniques when there has also been prior physical or sexual assault or prior threat of physical or sexual violence. It is subtle and emotional and it manifests through humiliation, restriction on what an individual can and cannot do, preservation of information, purposeful act of belittling or degrading the individual or, and, in some situations, threat of child custody.

Psychological violence undermines a person's identity and self-worth, leaving them disoriented and displaced. A spatial approach to V. Shantaram's 'Amar Jyoti (1936)' and Kiran Rao's 'Laapataa Ladies (2023)' can serve the point. The first movie revolves around Saudamini. She is the leader of the pirates. She is denied the custody of her son, by the queen and her manipulative Minister of Justice, Durjaya, when she chose to separate from her misogynist husband. Durjaya tells Saudamini that a woman is the slave of her husband and has no rights of her own. This enrages her and she chooses a livelihood where there is no distinction between women and men. She becomes a pirate, takes Durjaya as hostage and keeps him in chains. To make the queen, Karuna Devi, go through the pain of losing a child, she kidnaps the princess, Nandini. Nandini was kept in a cave where Saudamini lives along with her group of pirates. But soon after, Saudamini finds out that the princess has found a lover, Sudheer, who happens to be her long lost son. On the other hand, Durjaya escapes and attacks the pirates. Everyone flees but Saudamini is caught. While in prison Saudamini is threatened by Durjaya. To avenge himself, Durjaya intends to portray Saudamini as an evil woman to her son Sudheer, thereby ruining any chance of union between the mother and son. It is here where we witness Saudamini is tortured, broken and made to suffer but in mind, rather than body. What Durjaya does is an example of psychological violence for both in taking away a child from her mother, and keeping them away. All this happens because Saudamini revolted against the patriarchal law, refused to be ruled by her husband and exercised her basic rights. But by doing all this she challenged the gender-role, sexual hierarchy and power politics which nudged the whole structure of family, society and the masculine authority.

Psychological violence is a method of establishing and maintaining power relation between the Western masculine subject and their feminine subordinated 'Other'. Beauvoir points out that the masculinist culture assumes a woman to be the source of mystery and unknowability for men. Butler, building on Beauvoir's ideas and influenced by Sartre, notes that desire—often problematically assumed to be heterosexual and masculine—is framed as inherently troublesome. Butler speculates that:

For that masculine subject of desire, trouble became a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female "object" that inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position. The radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female "Other" suddenly exposes his autonomy as illusory (Butler 27).

Saudamini, in asserting the 'self', actually 'contests the place and authority of the masculine position (Butler 27).' She enters the space wherein only men held the power, till now and creates a 'place' where she is free, independent and alive, but in doing so she enrages the patriarchy. Jaya in Rao's movie does the same by challenging the exclusion of female autonomy and agency in the traditional male-dominated structures of a family.

Psychological violence is not merely an isolated phenomenon but the manifestation of gender inequalities and power hierarchy that have historically excluded women from public life and erased their contributions. This exclusion is evident in history, the very nomenclature [his (the masculine pronoun) + story] of which privileges patriarchal narratives while marginalizing or omitting women's contributions. Randall Haas writes that:

History has long denied women their rightful place, as evidenced by the theory of *Man the Hunter*, which erased women's contributions to early human societies (Haas, Watson and Buonasera)".

In 1968 Richard B. Lee and Irven DeVore published Man the Hunter. Their theory suggests that (i) hunting was a major driver of human evolution and it was carried out only by men, (ii) prehistoric humans had a division of labor, based in biological differences between males and females, wherein men evolved to hunt and provide and women tended to children and domestic duties. The theory of man the hunter dominated history, pervaded popular culture and obliterated women altogether from the pages of history. However, a 2013 excavation of the ancient remains in Peru revealed that 79% hunters were females in the Paleolithic Age. "The findings are consistent with nongendered labor practices in which early hunter-gatherer females were big-game hunters (Haas, Watson and Buonasera)." This busted the gender theory and exposed how Western society systematically excluded women from human history, contributing to women's placelessness. Similarly, Ancient Greek and Roman histories, such as those written by Herodotus and Thucydides, focus almost exclusively on male figures. The erasure of women's contributions to science, politics, and the arts can be noticed as well. For instance, Rosalind Franklin's critical role in the discovery of DNA's structure was largely ignored, with credit going to Watson and Crick (Maddox). Women are often portrayed as passive or secondary characters, if they are mentioned at all. Canonical texts like Ovid's Metamorphosis too have marginalized women's roles, which mostly portray them as victims of masculine libido and prowess. Even in modern historiography, women's contributions to labor movements and wartime efforts have been systematically overlooked (Cobble, 2004; Summerfield, 1998). In Indian history, women like Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi or Begum Hazrat Mahal are often relegated to footnotes, despite their significant roles in the Indian Rebellion of 1857 (Ray 241). In religious texts like the Bible and the Qur'an, women are often portrayed as lacking the abilities of

reasoning or judgment. For instance, Adam is given the authority to name all the beings of the paradise in the 'New Testament' (Fiorenza 235) , while in Islam there is no female figure except Marium who is venerated highly as being a servant of Allah. In Hinduism, while goddesses like Durga and Kali are worshipped, their stories are often framed within the context of male deities. For example: Durga as a creation of the gods to defeat Mahishasura (Kinsley 11) . In postcolonial histories, women's participation in independence movements (of India or Africa) is often downplayed. For instance, the contributions of women like Sarojini Naidu or Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti are less documented compared to their male counterparts (Jayawardena 99).

Both Wollstonecraft and Butler highlight how societal structures through gender norms enforce placelessness for women, but while Wollstonecraft focuses on education and autonomy as means of liberation, Butler suggests resistance and subversion of these norms through performative acts. Their theories provide a framework for analyzing *Laapataa Ladies* and *Amar Jyoti*, in the feminist context, only to demonstrate how certain controlled behavior and monitored actions result in the spatial imprisonment of a female. An in-depth study of Kiran Rao's 'Laapataa Ladies (2023)' underlines the need of women's education, autonomy and feminine space. Rao's movie revolves around two married women Jaya Tripathi Singh and Phool Kumari. These women just got married and are travelling with their respective husbands, Pradeep Singh and Deepak Kumar on the same train, Belpur-Katariya Express. Many other newlywed couples get into this crowded passenger train. All the brides are clad in red attire with the ghoonghat (veil) drawn up to the chin. Deepak and Pradeep happen to be in the same compartment. When Deepak reaches his destination, Surajmukhi village with the bride, it is revealed that his bride is exchanged. The bride who accompanied Deepak is Jaya. While Jaya ends up at Deepak's house, Phool Kumari is left on the Pateela station. The station master, Chhotu and Abdul try to help Phool but fail. Ultimately, she finds shelter in Manju Mai's house. The title alludes to these two women who are lost, therefore, without an address, hence 'laapataa'. It is interesting to note what happens, while Jaya is wavering on the threshold of the cultural boundaries of marriage. Jaya is actually an educated woman who wants to study about farming. She topped in her higher secondary but in spite of that her parents got her married to the widower, Pradeep Singh. The mishap on the journey and being disconnected from the in-laws, provides Jaya the opportunity to follow her dreams. She sells her wedding jewelries and with the help of her sister, enrolls herself for some graduation course. Jaya is denied further education because the society requires a woman to get married, raise a family and fit in the androgyny, of becoming a care taker. Sociologists like Talcott Parsons argues that human behavior is part of systems that help society keep organized and functional. Thus, children are gendered and socialized:

Boys are taught instrumental qualities like confidence and competitiveness" that prepare them for labor force. Meanwhile, girls are taught expressive qualities such as empathy and sensitivity, which prepare them to care for their families (Lauterwasser).

So, Jaya is a victim of the phallocentric culture which reduces women to objects of male desire and control. She cannot choose to have a career or become economically independent because male-centric power structures consistently restrict women's opportunities for education, autonomy and agency. Women are psychologically conditioned to be submissive and dependent on men. They cannot decide what they want to do. Saudamini while relating her story to Nandini gives a prelude on the life of a married woman.

It seemed as if a woman is man's slave. Laws say it. Scriptures provides testimony to it. And politics solidifies it… even if you become a queen you have to be the better-half of your husband, a queen is a slave to her husband that means, if you have ever go against his will, then you shall be punished and beaten (Shantaram).

And this echoes in "Laapataa Ladies (2023)" when Deepak's mother, Yashoda tells Jaya she likes to eat the curry of lotus stem but no longer cooks it because her husband does not like it. She remarks, ironically, if it's the time when women can cook the meals of their choice in the house. Phool's upbringing too confirms Parsons' argument. When Manju Mai learns that Phool is lost, she advises Phool to return to her parents' house. But Phool replies that a respectable girl can't return to her parents without her husband. It will create a scandal. To this, Manju Mai answers back that the masculinist society has been fooling women for long with the designation 'women of respectable families'. It only wants to control women and toy with them. Manju Mai calls it a 'fraud': "I was raised with good values. I had a good upbringing… I'm good at household chores. I can sew, cook, sing, pray (Rao) ." Phool is well trained to play a doll, by enacting the heteronormative gender norms because only by doing so she can make a place in the society. But unlike Phool, Jaya protests against the traditional gender norms and patriarchal boundaries; she refuses to go with her husband. She chooses education – she chooses independence. Characters' experiences of displacement (for instance, Phool being lost, Saudamini's exile and Jaya's being homeless) reflect broader spatial identity of the women. Edward Ralph pioneers the concepts of 'place' and 'placelessness' in 1976. He writes that:

The emotional symptoms of placelessness—homesickness, disorientation, depression, desolation—mimic the phenomena itself. Each of these symptoms involves a sense of unbearable emptiness. Separation from place is perhaps most poignantly felt in the forced homelessness of the reluctant emigrant, the displaced person, the involuntary exile (Relph x).

Since human evolution society has been transformed into patriarchal space where women feel no connection with the patriarchal society. Relph demonstrates the core lived structure of place as it has meaning in human life. When a person is new at a place, he or she will feel threatened, exposed and stressed. This feeling is what Relph calls 'outsideness' that every woman experiences when she is victimized on the name of gender.

A spatial or geocentric approach to the movies highlights how physical, social and symbolic spaces are used to challenge the gender norms. Space in "*Amar Jyoti (1936)" and "Laapataa Ladies (2023)"* is not just a backdrop against which the narratives are set, it is an active element which shapes the storyline and influences the characters' experiences. In "Amar Jyoti (1936)" Saudamini leaves the patriarchal boundaries of the society, only to find refuge in an open island, amongst the pirates. While the royal palace and society represent masculine hierarchy, the sea, the island and the tea-stall where Phool finds a job in "Laapataa Ladies (2023)" become the physical space of liberation and independence. Both the sea and the tea-stall stand for gerontocracy, where two eldest matriarchs are ruling over men and women alike, subverting the gender roles. The sea and the tea-stall also symbolize feminist societies where Saudamini and Manju Mai tutor Nandini and Phool respectively, on the ills of a male-dominated society, the flaws in education system and the skills for economic independence. Both the trainees are encouraged to acquire freedom, agency and identity. The social space, Saudamini shares amongst the pirates by the sea and that which Phool enlivens among Manju Mai, Chhotu, Abdul and station master on the train platform, is gender-neutral. The island and platform are transitory places wherein institutions, policies and cultural practices are inclusive rather than discriminatory. Saudamini feels out of place in the royal court as Jaya feels in her marriage to Pradeep Singh. Soon both these characters, Saudamini and Jaya, understand how gender serves as a means to consolidate and perpetuate gender-based hierarchy, normative violence, and masculine power politics. Hence, they along with Manju Mai [who runs a tea stall and has driven away her husband and son for they were living off of her income and used to torment her] step back from gender norms and devote themselves on self-creation. They follow on the footsteps of Wollstonecraft, Beauvoir and Judith Butler. They resist the views that made presumptions about the limits and proprieties of gendered body and create a space outside the misogynist bonds of patriarchal society. By losing their conjugal identity they attain the place which assists them in growth, development and formation of the new identity. The comparison between *Amar Jyoti* (1936) and *Laapataa Ladies* (2023) is compelling, as it highlights the persistence of gender-based issues across different historical and cultural contexts.

However, despite the feminist stand by the leading characters to create a feminine space in the andocentric society, both *Amar Jyoti* (1936) and *Laapataa Ladies* (2023) reinforce traditional gender roles and the subordination of women through social and legal means. Both the matriarchs eventually fail to liberate their pupils from the chains of marital bondage: in Shantaram's movie Saudamini separates herself from the feminist cause, leaving Nandini in charge. But Nandini falls in love with Sudheer and subsequently abandons the feminine struggle for agency in order to accept male dominance; while in Rao's movie Phool gains economic independence and becomes autonomous, only to assume the subordinate role of a wife under Deepak's wings. Jaya is almost persecuted for running away from her husband. Also, Jaya is shown to be enticed by a man and as she embarks on a journey for self-liberation, her love-interest represents her ultimate destination to be. Thus, both the movies do incorporate heteronormative patriarchy which enforces rigid gender binaries and normative violence, leaving little room for non-conforming identities.

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