

Reducing the Female Body to Ashes: Domestic Violence in Ananda Devi's *Le Sari Vert*

Dr. T. Priya, M.A., Ph.D.

Assistant Professor & Co-ordinator

Centre for French, School of English & Foreign Languages

Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli 620 024, Tamil Nadu, India

Mobile : 82200 08255 manupriya58@yahoo.com

Abstract

Ananda Devi takes a critical look at the Mauritian and Indian societies. As an anthropologist, she observes and decodes social laws to highlight the subjugation of the female body in patriarchal cultures. Man objectifies the female body and inflicts violence through marriage, domestic violence, rape, prostitution, pornography, and incest. An examination of Devi's *Le Sari vert* brings to light how marriage as a social institution victimises woman, reduces the female body as an object and contributes to violence. To be feminine, woman must be passive, silent, timid, obedient, reverent, submissive, dependent, and cheerfully surrender herself as her husband's servant. Overlooking the patriarchal codes and conventions is labeled deviant and irrational.

Ananda Devi is a literary prolific, a new generation mauritian francophone writer. The island of Mauritius, which becomes the backdrop of most of Devi's novels has been an inexhaustible source of inspiration to her. Though Devi refuses being labeled a feminist, her themes represent the stark realities of the patriarchal cultures. Devi's writings focus on the exploitation and confinement of femininity and highlights the struggle and revolt for autonomy. In an interview with Patrick Sultan, Devi states that a woman cannot be free with her body. She is born with the chains imposed on her that accumulate all through her life. To Ananda Devi, it has always been a question of ownership of the female body because the two countries, Mauritius and India deny woman the right to her body. Devi rejects the image of the ideal woman established by man. She desires to let woman live as she wants with her body. She asserts that woman must regain possession of her body and reaffirm the right that she has on her body. In a militant way, Devi reacts affirmatively to deconstruct the patriarchal society and this deconstruction is expressed through her characters. Violence is omnipresent in Devi's texts. On the subject of violence packed in her novels, she explains in an interview that "in a world where there are as many battered women... in a world where women are raped daily, I do not see how my vision is excessive!". Devi also notes in an interview with Fabien Mollon that:

There is in Mauritius a latent violence that we do not necessarily perceive as a stranger. It feels very sweet, everyone lives very well together, but there are things bubbling under the surface. The harmony is superficial, a little mechanical for the society to work. But very deeply, in the mentalities, there is a strong mistrust towards the other (Translation is mine).

In *Le Sari Vert*, Devi explores the terrorism of domestic violence evoking the readers to reflect on how the female body has been objectified through patriarchal ideologies in indo-mauritian cultures. According to the United Nations, the term “ violence against women” means any act of gender-based violence that results in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty in public or private life (Mary Ellsberg, Lori Heise : 11). The physical, psychological, sexual and economic abuse inflicted on woman saps her energy and self-esteem and leads to certain mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, phobias, and post-traumatic stress disorders. In *Rethinking Domestic Violence*, Donald G. Dutton asserts that “ wife assault, kept largely out of public view and tolerated by prevailing attitudes, was regarded by feminists as an evil symptom of Patriarchy ” (Dutton : 17). The assault of woman has its roots in the subordination of women and the assertion of male authority and control. Marriage is a social institution which contributes to exploitation and domestic violence and keeps woman in a state of fear. Marriage is a sexual contract that affirms the patriarchal right over the female body. Patriarchy glorifies the institution of heterosexuality which is a hierarchical and repressive system; man dominates and dictates, woman is enslaved, objectified and exploited. Radical feminists Susan Brownmiller, Sheila Jeffrys, Catherine Mckinnon claim that objectification is dehumanizing and degrading and violation of woman’s human rights. Man’s gaze objectifies the female body and imposes the hierarchical social structures that subordinate woman and inflict violence on the female body. Culture encourages power in the male and passivity in the female; power is thrust on the female body. Women internalize fear and passivity which prevent her from considering her own potential and energy.

In *Le Sari vert*, Devi gives us the portrait of an authoritarian and tyrannical old man, Dokter-Dieu, who crushes to nothing his wife, daughter, and granddaughter. The cancer stricken old man awaits his last days in Curepipe with his daughter, Kitty and his granddaughter, Mallika. He is a dictator who is proud to have mastered the codes the conventions of the patriarchal world. When Kitty and Mallika interrogate the old man about the death of his wife, the secrets of the bygone days resurface and unveil the perpetrator of physical and psychological abuse. The old man’s confessions take Kitty and Mallika by storm. A violent dialogue breaks out between him and the two women when he justifies his actions and accuses his poor wife. The Dokter expresses his misogyny and his masculine strength when he declares that all women deserve to be beaten as Neil S. Jacobson, John Mordechai Gottman state in *When Men Batter Women: New Insights into Ending Abusive Relationships* that “men are generally physically stronger than women and they are often socialized to use violence as a method of control” (35). In *Loving to Survive*, Dee Graham states that men terrorize women for sexual, emotional, domestic, and reproductive services. Like hostages who work to placate their captors, women work to please men. As Dee Graham argues, domestic violence is an assertion of patriarchal power in the family, the old man emphasizes the patriarchal right of man to torment the body of the woman.

Domestic violence is a process of sexist domination. Claire Chamberland believes that spousal abuse is a way of controlling women with roots in the relationship of unequal power between men and women. The aim of the violence is to control and dominate the body of the woman who is under the influence of the aggressor. He states,

Family violence has led researchers, especially feminists, to see in the unequal power of men and women, deeply rooted in patriarchal societies, the essential cause of violence against women in the sphere of private life. Within this type of society, the authority of man is socially legitimized by patriarchal structures that endorse the coercion and control he exercises over his spouse (Chamberland:15 ; translation is mine) .

Burying the terrible events of the past, the ailing man resumes his verbal abuse when he feels the thrill of fear in his daughter Kitty. He continues to fabricate stories about his wife's death in order to manipulate his daughter Kitty and granddaughter Mallika who fulfill his culinary needs. The old man screeches that an ideal woman is one who excels and surpasses in culinary art; cooking is the most important of all the traditional roles of women. Society conditions woman to believe that her fulfilment lies in marriage and motherhood. She is domesticated and enslaved in the private sphere and confined to the traditional gender roles; kitchen is the very space to which she is confined and which restrains her. With reference to this patriarchal attitude, Chamberland notes that “ the confinement of women in the domestic sphere has strengthened the role of the man as the sole provider which has resulted in greater control of the wife by his spouse” (Chamberland : 16, translation is mine).

The affirmation of Carole Counihan in *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power* is relevant to our analysis of *Le Sari vert*:

Men may wield power by controlling food purchases and claiming the authority to judge the meals women cook. They can disparage the food or demand certain dishes. Men can refuse to provide food or to eat. Husbands often legitimate wife abuse by citing meal failures (Counihan: 11, 12).

The statements are true in this novel. The narrator judges every meal served by the women of three generations. He recollects that the undercooked food becomes the source of his fury and violence against his wife. The rice was badly cooked, the chicken was elastic and the vegetables were burnt. His wife is punished and eventually burnt for her inability to cook well. He accuses that his daughter Kitty was not a good cook like her dead mother. Even when Mallika makes a succulent biryani with spices and meat for her mother's birthday, the grandfather gobbles, but shows no sign of appreciation. The Doktor had always dreamt of an ideal woman who would conform to the traditional norms of society. His anonymous wife failed to meet the narrator's expectations of being an ideal woman. He says that his wife never obeys him. She was neither a good housewife nor a good cook. Disgust, hatred, and violence which have been boiling within the Doktor burst out when his wife continued to burn the vegetables and rice. He declares that she was unfit for marital life. He had punched and thrashed her thinking that the lessons of violence would teach her that she ought to serve her master sincerely and with dedication. This could be supported by Neil S. Jacobson and John Mordechai Gottman's statement that “battering is physical aggression with a purpose: that purpose is to control, intimidate and subjugate another human being ” (25). The abuser states that his wife's refusal to conform to the traditional gender roles had resulted in her destruction. He elaborates,

She had started to burn the meal, put salt instead of sugar, ironed my shirts leaving creases everywhere, did not pick up my knits, did not sew the buttons properly,

leaving holes in my socks, misplaced my books while arranging them, brought hot boiling water for my bath when there was no water supply – she was like a bad genie in the house, the more time passed and the more she did things wrong and I could not stand to shout and hit. She challenged me, I'm sure. She wanted to see how far she could go (Devi: 125, translation is mine).

This highlights the existing imbalances of power in patriarchal cultures where man expects domestic services from women authoritatively but fails to render the same domestic services to women. This is evocative of Counihan's affirmation in *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power*:

Food provisioning often reproduces female subordination by requiring women to serve, satisfy and defer to husbands, who do not feel a similar need to serve their women. Reciprocity of giving and receiving, of cooking and eating, makes for equality among partners and its lack contributes to power imbalances. In many ways, food establishes and reflects male and female identity and relationships (Counihan : 1).

The anonymous wife was a silent and passive woman, disapprovingly she waged a war of silence. Having given birth to her first child, she enjoyed her motherhood and spent her time reconstructing herself, feeding her child, changing clothes, bathing and rocking the baby, singing songs to cuddle her. It appeared to the Doktor that his wife was neglecting all her responsibilities. Impatience and fury had mounted in this man who grumbled that his wife lived like an angel and had no intention of taking back her responsibilities. He struck his wife again, asking her to cook and clean the house as usual. He even punished her not to wear expensive saris and sandals. From this event, the Doktor's wife refused to speak. Abused by her husband verbally, physically, and psychologically, she engaged a war of silence and refused the established order of society. One day, when the poor woman prepared disintegrated rice and charred lentils, the Doktor was diabolically furious. He wondered how she expected the master of the house to eat that meal. Clenching his jaws and cracking his teeth, he seized his wife's plait so hard and hit her against the table several times. Covering herself in a shell of silence, she neither screamed nor protested. Once this scene of violence is accomplished, the aggressor feels “ an eruption of triumph” (Devi : 28). Chamberland observes that “physical violence attacks the integrity and sense of physical security of the woman or child by physical means of varying severity, ranging from jostling to homicide” (Chamberland : 33, translation is mine). This event forces the victim into a state of confusion, fear, shame, guilt and helplessness. The victim loses her self-esteem.

Here is a victim of domestic violence. Her body is constantly threatened, tormented, and destroyed by male turbulence and turmoil. Her body trembles out of fear and pain and bleeds as Neil S. Jacobson, John Mordechai Gottman argue that “ battering is always accompanied by emotional abuse, is often accompanied by injury, and is virtually always associated with fear and even terror on the part of the battered women” (25). The trembling of his wife's body brings pleasure to the husband. He rejoices his heroism having conquered the corporeal territory of his wife. He says whole-heartedly that “ Violence is a grace ” (Devi : 29). With regard to this patriarchal attitude, Chamberland notes that “ the emotions

felt by these men are certainly shaped by a traditional socialization strongly marked by a patriarchal structuring of the relationships between men and women ” (Chamberland : 77, translation is mine).

According to Chamberland :

These different types of aggression threaten the sense of security and development of women and children: feelings of fear that can lead to the experience of post-traumatic stress disorder that paralyze and immobilize more or less severe the development of the concerned people; feelings of mistrust and betrayal that damage the ability to maintain relationships of trust with one's environment and that challenge the learning of positive social relationships; feelings of depression and helplessness that threaten the development of a positive self-concept and compromise the capacity for autonomy, self-determination and self-realization. These assaults also undermine the integrity of the family system (36, translation is mine).

His statements are true in the novel. One day, the Dokter kicks at his wife's fragile body. She falls to the ground, those powerful blows completely annihilate her body. She remains motionless, silent and almost faints because her weak body could not bear anymore. Owing to the physical and psychological abuse, she becomes completely isolated, silent, and depressed. Reacting to perpetrator's abuse, Donald G. Dutton states in *Rethinking Domestic Violence* that “it is the holding of absolute power that leads humans to act abusively ” (24). The Dokter has the impression that he is disrespected at home whilst he is glorified in the outside world. The wife's silent revolt, clumsiness, indifference, negligence, disorder, and impropriety triggers impatience and hatred for the Dokter who regards her as a witch. He even convinces his daughter that she is no longer her mother but a nasty witch. Kitty obeys her father and refuses to caress her mother. Kitty's indifference paralyzes the mother who plunges into complete silence. She fails to bathe, does not change her clothes, moves in the house frozen by fear and silence. She is traumatized by fear of violence and insecurity. She is overwhelmed by feelings of depression and helplessness. Her state of mind could be supported by the statement of Muriel Salmona, a doctor who finds that “ domestic violence creates a sense of inferiority, worthlessness and humiliation through denigration, criticism and hurtful words about the physical, verbal expression, intellectual abilities, work, domestic chores, education children, sexuality ”. It also makes us reflect on the affirmations of Del Martin in the article *Society's Vindication of the Wife-Batterer*. Del Martin analyses the status of the battered women who continuously lets herself be assaulted without stepping out. He argues that

the battered wife is constantly accused of being masochistic. Why else would she stay? She stays because society has not made room for her in any other place, because she cannot obtain help, and because she is economically dependent. She stays because the structure of her society says she cannot do anything about a man who wants to beat her. Religiously she is tied to him "for better or for worse, until death do us part" - and that often happens. Socially, she is looked upon as a failure unless she holds the family together, and family service agencies are more concerned with reconciliation than with her safety. Legally, the wife cannot find relief or protection. Economically she is likely to be destitute, and in trying to apply for welfare she finds that she has to have an already established separate domicile of

her own, something which she can't do if she has no money', Psychologically and emotionally she is completely demoralized and devastated. (Martin: 398)

The sari is the only testimony of the death of the Dokter's wife. On the day of the horror, at dinner time, the Dokter's wife brings the pot of rice to the table. The Dokter wonders how she would serve glutinous and greasy rice to the master of the home. Fury and fatigue drive the father monstrous and volcanic. In a fit of rage, he pours the pot of boiling hot rice on his wife's head; the rice drips from his head to his feet releasing heat and smoke. The boiling rice burns the body of Kitty's mother. She remains motionless without crying, goes back to her room with hot rice congealing on her body. These violent incidents bring to light the absolute power and right of the husbands to punish and torment the female body. Man believes that the female body belongs to man which culture supports. These incidents of violence is reminiscent of the arguments of R. Emerson Dobash, Russell P. Dobash in *Women, Violence and Social Change*. They explain,

The sources of conflict leading to violent events reveal a great deal about the nature of relations between men and women, demands and expectations of wives, the prerogatives and power of husbands and cultural beliefs that support individual attitudes of marital inequality (3). ... The four main sources of conflict leading to violent attacks are men's possessiveness and jealousy, men's expectations of women's domestic work, men's sense of the right to punish their women for perceived wrongdoing and the importance to women for maintaining or exercising their position of authority (4).

She chooses death, the only form of liberation from this society that devours little by little her dreams and her desires. The green sari, which has touched a young, tender, beautiful, and illuminated body perishes losing its beauty. It is no longer an attractive body of the woman that can seduce. It is a skeleton with charred and perished flesh. She becomes a mass of garbage in the bed. The body of the woman is in a state of extreme degradation, stripped of its femininity. The female body becomes a "chicken on a kitchen table ... It has no soul, no consciousness, no emotions" (Devi : 165, translation is mine). Unable to perform the traditional female role of cooking, the woman is reduced to the state of the meat. The Dokter justifies his actions by saying, "A woman's body is made to be pierced, troubled and tormented, but not a man's body. No such humiliation has never been our due" (Devi 150, translation is mine).

Kitty's exposure to scenes of violence at home traumatizes the little girl. Interiorizing the scenes of violence, she shudders with fear. After the death of her mother, Kitty begins to take care of the house. She is still terrified by her father's gaze. Later, as a young girl, she finds relief and comfort in a love affair with a librarian. The Dokter begins to hate her and makes fun of the love and desire of the newlyweds. With eyes filled with hatred and rage, he cuts Kitty's pink sari into rags and throws it in the trash. Throwing the sari in the trash, he throws his wife, daughter, and their femininity into the garbage can. He could not stand to see another man possessing all the things in his territory. The father complains, "He had his wife. He had my Kitty. He had my things" (Devi : 146, translation is mine).

With Mallika to her rescue, Kitty questions her father about the mysterious death of his mother. Mallika does not remain silent in front of her grandfather. She is a brave girl who is ready to face the omnipotence of her grandfather. The old man who lives with his daughter Kitty prides himself in saying that he has lived an exemplary life and that he has the responsibility to put everything in order at his daughter's house. He lauds that man has discovered fire, wheel, tools, hunting, farming, and mechanization. He affirms that man is the one who pushed science and culture forward. He believes that woman is the creature destined for home and domestic chores and that she ought to be a puppet in the hands of the puppeteer man.

As usual, the father awaits the tasty meals of his daughter and granddaughter. As he is now dependent on them for food and other needs, it is through food that Kitty and Malika seek to revenge him for his crime and his attitude of nullifying woman. On many occasions, the narrator complains that he is hungry because Kitty and Malika force him to wait for his meals. Malika serves him arrow-roots and other insipid meals justifying that they were food meant for the old men. Mallika boils with anger and frustration. She exercises her power over the grandfather by refusing to cook, preparing food that he hates, and forcing him to eat the tasteless meals. Counihan's statement in *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power* is appropriate to our reading of *Le Sari vert*. He argues that "women can exert power over men by refusing to cook, cooking food men dislike, and forcing them to eat " (Counihan:12).

Mallika, terrified by the inhumanity of her grandfather, forces him to confess and apologize for his sins. Slamming her teeth violently, she asserts that the rage and violence of her grandfather were worthless and would leave him in solitary confinement until his death. Realising that her grandfather was a fierce dictator, she makes a revolt against the established structure of the man and proclaims herself a lesbian. The Dokter does not support the rebellious vision of his granddaughter which plunges him into disgust and shame.

Mallika is a rebellious woman who transgresses the male order to expose her hatred against man and to destabilize the image of a silent woman. Mallika is a courageous girl with a laughter of a man and a grave tone whose expression scares the grandfather himself. To avenge her grandfather, Mallika says that she loves another black woman. She glorifies her lesbian affair that gives no space for the existence and violence of man. Without humiliation, she speaks about lesbian sex, intimate smell, touch, feminine desire, caress, and enjoyment with Marie-Rose Patience. For the Dokter, who believes that a woman's body exists only to be pierced by man, lesbian existence is a subversion and a violation of the constructions of patriarchy. The idea that Mallika and Marie-Rose make love in bed to find pleasure is awful and disgusting for the grandfather. The sexual deviance of a lesbian life, unacceptable in the patriarchal society blows up the grandfather. Malliks believes that lesbian sex overthrows male supremacy and the omnipotence of the wild man. By her lesbian sexual transgression, Mallika revolts against patriarchy and breaks the patriarchal image of the silent woman.

India and Mauritius are two countries rooted in the customs and traditions of patriarchy. Devi's characters are trapped by patriarchal conventions. Women who introspect on their enslavement and want to liberate themselves are labeled witches and anti-social. Devi exposes the suffocating societies where

women struggle to value their existence and their autonomy. Devi's perceptions attempt to redefine female stereotypes and social values in order to liberate the female body from patriarchy and create a space that is unique to women. To conclude, may I recollect Ananda Devi's statements in an interview at Jaipur Literature Festival which support the reclamation of the female body in order to deconstruct the patriarchal thought of objectifying the female body : " ... a woman will always be a mystery to men, she holds a powerful secret of creation and this secret, which can turn her into a goddess or a witch, is dangerous to men. All the rules are made to curb this power, to make a woman disown herself, lose her capability of choosing for herself, and most of the whole, the freedom to do as she wishes with her body. The first step is to take back the ownership of her body. The rest will follow ”.

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Dr. T. Priya, M.A., Ph.D.

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