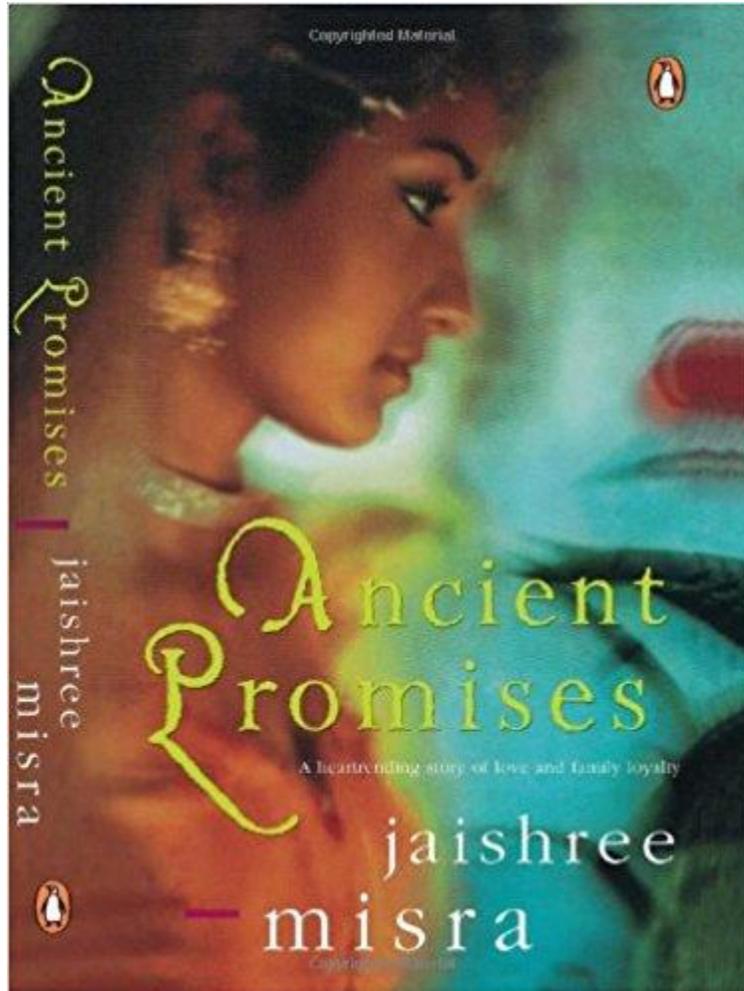


The Divergent Shades of Domestic Violence in the Indian Narrative
Mila Michael



Patriarchy

The continued existence of mankind through ages is directly linked to the survival of the institution of family, where a man and a woman unite themselves; the catalyst being the term 'love'. By the efflux of time the relationship progresses and continues and to a certain extent gets tied down within the parameters of the definitions of compromise, commitment, responsibilities, obligations and so on. The system or institution of family carved out from marriage have its essence and rules, directly linked with the thought of a patriarchal system wherein definite set of rules define the relationship, leading to gender superiority and leaving the

female counter part to an adjustment mode disempowering her from exercising her capabilities and qualifications affecting her financial and educational independence eventually pressed to settle for lesser independence and lower status in the social strata.

Equality

In the modern society, the most debated word in every sphere of life is the term 'equality'. This term has gathered much significance in the wake of discrimination in every field of activity and the debate on gender equality tops the position. Gender equality can be summarized as the state of equal ease to access to resources and opportunities regardless of gender which includes economic participation and decision making and the state of valuing different behaviours and aspirations regardless of gender connotations. This being a general perception of equality, the term gets lesser degree of importance in a marital relationship due to a circumstance build up on a different footing. But such circumstances should not dilute the individuality, personality or any other aspects of a female, her choice of independence and dreams as a human being and the same is not subservient to her spouse or any other person in relation.

Gender Inequality

In a patriarchal society, the gender inequality in marriage persists which prevents the female from spreading her wings to her capabilities and to enjoy her rights as a human being leading to discord in relationships and discrimination in her day to day affairs. The period of silent suffering in marriages has come down by the advent of time due to the continuous debates being taken up on this issue. The suffering in marriages whether it be physical or emotional, creates injuries and distress to the woman, leaving the relationship with an unhealthy note affecting the different spheres of her life. Even though the matrimonial inequality and the suffering therefrom had always existed, it took about 5 and a half decades post-independence for us to have a serious thought for a legislation to protect the women from Domestic Violence. Over the years, this issue has attained global recognition and the same has been defined undoubtedly as a 'human rights' issue and a serious deterrent to development. The Vienna Accord of 1994 and the Beijing Declaration and the Platform of Action (1995) have acknowledged this issue as an imminent one to be addressed. The United Nations Committee on Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in its General Recommendation No. XII (1989) has recommended that State parties should act to protect women against Violence of any kind especially that occurring within the family. In India the Phenomenon of domestic violence is widely prevalent but has remained largely invisible in public domain. A specific law catering to the issue has been brought in our country only by the year 2005 keeping in mind the fundamental rights guaranteed under Articles 14 (Right to equality) Article 15 (Prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of religion, caste, sex or place of birth) and Article 21 (Protection of life and personal liberty) of the constitution of India, to provide a remedy under the civil law to protect the woman from being victims of Domestic Violence, and to prevent its occurrence. For achieving the said objectives, the Protection of Women From Domestic Violence Act 2005 was promulgated and came into force on the 26th day of October 2006. The term Domestic Violence under the Act has been given the widest of interpretations including actual abuse or threat or abuse that is physical, sexual, verbal, emotional or economic. The Act provides for the rights of women to secure housing in her matrimonial

house or shared household by passing protection orders by the concerned Magistrates such as Residence Orders as well as Orders of Monetary reliefs from the husband.

Social Stigma of Domestic Violence

The wide spread social stigma associated with domestic violence discourages most of the victims from reporting such instances fearing further discrimination and the thought that “will anyone believe me” had made the issue to be swept under the carpet in most of the cases and leaving it invisible in the eye of the Public Domain. We have two characters ie Janaki of *Ancient Promises* by Jaishree Misra and the unnamed female protagonist of ‘When I hit you’ Or a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife’ by Meena Kandasamy wherein both the characters go through such trauma in their marriages, suffering divergent shades of domestic violence which a vast majority of women suffers at some point of their lives.

Before going into the intrigue specifics of the violence meted out to the characters at the hands of their spouses, it seems to be an absolute necessity to travel through the deep rooted cultural perception of man –woman relationship in a marriage, and the influence of the societal behavior towards any issues involving marital discords. Women are placed in a submissive mode for their marriage to workout. Society being moulded on a patriarchal influence of thought, normalizes abuse that a woman may face at the hands of her husband in general. The act of forced marital intercourse by itself is not considered to be an offence if the woman is over 18 years of age, rules the Hon’ble Supreme Court of India⁽¹⁾ while deciding the issue of exception 2 to Section 375 Indian Penal Code dealing with rape which reads as follows; “ *Sexual Intercourse or sexual acts by a man with his own wife, not being 18 years, is rape*”.

Physical and Psychological Effects

The physical and psychological effects pressed upon the mental equilibrium of the woman is unattended to; as the society lives with a bundle of myths when it comes to dealing with issues of marital discords. It is in this context, the question of equality of the spouse in a relationship comes into actual conflict with the term equality. The female partner is committed to live upon in a marriage with a good girl image to have the sympathy of the society. In most of the cases, the woman’s aspirations, dreams, independence etc., may stand in her way to have a meaningful life according to her wishes within the marriage.

Ancient Promises

The two characters in comparison, here in the light of domestic violence suffered by them in marriage are Janaki of *Ancient Promises* by Jaishree Misra and the unnamed narrator in “When I hit you Or a Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife’ by Meena Kandasamy. Both these characters pass through different levels of sufferance in their marital relationship. Janaki faces abuse at the hands of an indifferent husband, whereas the unnamed narrator is physically and emotionally abused. Whatever the form of abuse, both these women are exposed to domestic violence. Janaki of *Ancient Promises* is one such character who suffers verbal abuses from her in laws unprotected by her husband from such abuses. Janaki is a Malayali Nair girl born and brought up in Delhi, daughter of an Airforce Officer. She is married off to one Suresh of Maraar family, an affluent business family. Her marriage with Suresh only brings her heart break and agony. Her husband Suresh is, according to Janaki – an expert in the art of escape.

Janaki's husband avoids meeting her emotional needs. Janaki craved for affection from Suresh and his family which was covertly denied to her and after ten years of living with an indifferent husband and his verbally abusive family, chipped away at her self-esteem and worth. The million little things that broke her spirit over the years, the tiny insults, so small and so subtle as to be almost invisible, robbed her gradually of her knowledge of herself. Her husband and his family uses the tactic of gaslighting to make her question her reality. This form of manipulation that sows seeds of doubt in the individual being abused to make them question their perception and sanity is also used on the nameless narrator by her husband. While the nameless narrator is beaten, broken and raped to fit into the model wife of her husband's twisted mind, Janaki is made to fit the mould of the perfect daughter-in-law of the Maraar family through verbal abuse.

In *Ancient Promises*, Janaki is seen as a knick-knack on her husband's mantle piece, she looked pretty but was getting very dusty. Her husband and family were always careful to not break or cause visible cracks on her person, but it definitely caused emotional cracks. Janaki's plight can be directly compared to the Chinese Water Torture, a process in which water is slowly dripped on to a person's forehead, allegedly making the restrained victim insane. Both the characters, not for any reason of theirs, but due to the cultural prejudice netted on to them finds it difficult to convince their plight to persons or authorities who are strictly rooted in the traditional Patriarchal mindset when it comes to marriage and treatment of women within the marital circle. At some point in the marriage, a child is seen as a panacea for all marital problems. Both these characters remain perplexed before the usual set of questions such as: - Don't your husband take care of your necessities? Don't you have a shelter given by your husband when majority doesn't have it? Yes They Do- But ? None of the interlocutors see the plight and emotional sufferance of the characters, their aspirations, or their mental happiness. Both these characters felt reduced to good-for-nothing and dependent and subservient to their husbands and are engulfed in the stigma of cultural hypocrisy preventing them from finding a new lease of life, but it is always easier for an abusive man to find new lease of life.

Be in Conformity with the Society

Trying to conform with what society wants and thinks a wife should do or be, makes the female characters more uncomfortable, unhappy and hopeless. The insensitive question asked by the very society that perpetuates the crime of abuse against women is, "why do they stay in an abusive relationship? And whether it was consensual? Men tend to use physical, emotional and sexual abuse as a weapon to subdue a woman because it is considered the norm of the society, and even elevates the position of the husband. Our society actually empathizes with the abusive husband in most of the cases leaving the status of the wife to be that of a subservient slave who obeys the master.

Victims

Victims in an abusive environment resort to coping mechanisms to survive and retain their ounce of sanity. The psychological coping mechanisms are commonly termed as coping strategies or coping skills. Both the female characters use their own coping strategies to survive in their respective relationships. Janaki survives and tries to maintain her sanity by finding comfort in her daughter and hopes for a better future along with her child by trying to go for a higher education abroad and for getting herself financially placed. The unnamed narrator uses

her persona as an author to create a surrealistic feel to escape when she is hit or raped by her husband. The unnamed narrator and her husband becomes characters in her story, and this is the only way she could make herself feel she is in control of the abusive situation, to escape it. Both Janaki and the unnamed narrator find redemption from their abusive relationships through divorce. We have these two female characters who do not let the abuse meted out to them in their marital relationship ruin their perspective about men and love. We have Janaki who finds peace, solace in the right Man, and the unnamed narrator who still believes, even though it is broken heartedly, in Love.

Legal Provisions

The Law in the subject of domestic violence considers all sorts of violences meted out to a women in her domestic relationship. Whether it be physical, sexual, verbal, emotional or economic abuse. Remedies are also incorporated by way of Protection Orders that could be passed by the Magistrate in whose court the case is brought in. How far this law has achieved its goals in protecting the women may depend on many reasons including the inordinate delay in the judicial process and the technicalities involved therein. But it has definitely opened an era which has created a cause for hope in addressing the suffering of women in a domestic relationship, and the same can lead to achieving radical change in the mindset of the society by getting itself convinced of the requirements of marital relationship by breaking out of the shell of patriarchal school of thought. Law can act as a deterrent, inculcating the wide spectrum of intentions that the Parliament thought of, or debated while passing the law of Domestic Violence. The society has to take its lessons from these aspects to treat the women as equal members of the society in relation to the marital relationship to achieve a meaningful social justice.

=====

References

Ancient Promises by Jaishree Misra
When I Hit you : Or, A Potrait of the Writer as a Young Wife by Meena Kandasamy.
Law on Domestic Violence in India - Dr. Dipa Dube
www.un.org (CEDAW – Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Woman)
www.unwoman.org
beijing20.unwomen.org
(United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women).
www.supremecourtofindia.nic.in - Independent Thought V. Union of India.
Constitution of India – Dr. J N Pandey.

=====

Mila Michael
Guest Lecturer
Fatima Matha National College
Kollam
Kerala
mila.michael@rediffmail.com