



PURIFICATION TALE: MUTED VOICES OF WOMEN OF THE BOHRA COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Female Gender Mutilation is not a new phenomenon. It refers to the mutilation of the clitoris through a hot knife. Through this purification the girl goes through pain and agony right from her childhood. More than the physical pain, it is the psychological pain that renders the woman slave to her own body. Religion and its doctrines justify the act as uprooting the "source of sin" from the body of a woman thus saving her from bringing shame to the family and on herself. FGM takes place on a larger scale among the Bohra community, a sub sect of the Shia community in Islam. The doctrines put forth states that the removal of the immoral flesh will save the person from bringing shame on the family and community. The irony stands that men who see the flesh as immoral question the purity of the woman if she does not bleed or if she does not get the pleasure while consummating the marriage or at times before that. The role of woman to safeguard her own body is jeopardized rendering her as an object which is possessed and protected by men as a motive of misogyny, strongly backed by patriarchy. The paper presents an analysis of the legal, psychological and social implication of victims of FGM in the cultural context of this place. Drawing a unbiased gender neutral conclusion, the paper focuses on their painful experiences of the victims at the behest of safeguarding the honor of the family and finally their struggle for justice. This paper deals with quest of the victims and their fight to question the atrocity subjected in the name of religion and patriarchy.

Keywords: purity, muted voices, gender mutilation, patriarchal society



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Introduction

The role of women has always been a contested topic in the society. From her birth to adulthood to death, she comprises the various identities of a daughter, sister, wife, mother, grand mother etc. The roles which a woman inhabits however is backed by a male ideology where the woman has no say. This is not a new phenomenon and has been continuing since centuries. Patriarchy in the Indian society which boasts about male dominance and ideology is one of the fundamental reasons for the depression of women in the society. The most important aspect of patriarchy is that it has intertwined its effects in fields like religion, culture, economy and politics which further makes women a victim to men. Religious doctrines in Hinduism speak of *Ardhangini* where in the eternal being consists of two halves i.e man and woman where in both are equal and one cannot be completed without the other.

In Christianity, the doctrines in the Old Testament speaks about God's creation of Man and Woman and their role to procreate. In Islam, the nobility of a man depends on how best he is to his wife/wives. Although religion speaks about the equality between man and woman, certain doctrines tend to be twisted and interpreted showing woman and her role in a poor light.

Over the year's woman has been subjected to various atrocities at social, cultural and political level. The mere understanding of women as a liability is well enshrined in the minds of men who continue to exploit them. Issues such as Sati, child marriage, rape, dowry which took place during the pre-independence period continues till date. Such acts condemn a woman's role and questions her fundamental and basic right to life. Over the year's women have faced various atrocities at the behest of patriarchy. Woman has no right over her life and is controlled to satisfy the needs of other, particularly men. However, there are few cases which go unnoticed of violation of woman's right not by men but by a woman itself.

Female Genital Mutilation or Female Genital Cutting is an act where in the clitoris is removed by using a hot knife or blade. The act is justified through the notion of purity and is exercised upon girl child between the age of 7 and 15 years. The major proponents of this act are the Dawoodi Bohra community, a sub sect of the Shia in the Islamic order. Although this act infringes the basic right to life and liberty of the girl it's looked upon by the religious doctrines as act of protection and honor of the community. The after effects of the genital mutilation is sorrowful resulting into excessive bleeding, tetanus, loss of sexual orientation and at times painful death. The act is performed inside closed doors and is performed by elderly women. Over the years, many activists and women from the community have come forward to voice their opinion on this barbaric act. Though legislations and laws speak volumes of protection of women and girl child, the practical implementations of these laws are yet to bear results.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or Female Genital Cutting (FGC) :

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or Female Genital Cutting (FGC) is a ritualistic practice among various religious communities where in the Clitoris or the external female genitalia of a girl child is surgically removed either partially or whole. The World Health Organisation acknowledges the role of FGM as an infringement on the physical, psychological and human rights of the victims. Based on the study, the WHO has put forth 4 types of classification of FGM. Type I includes the removal of the prepuce or the clitoral hood at times along with a part or the whole of Clitoris. Type II includes the removal of the prepuce and the clitoris

along with a part or the whole of inner vaginal lips (Labia Minora). Type III includes the complete removal of the clitoris and the inner vaginal lips along with the outer part of the vulva. Once surgically removed, the outer part is sewed using thorns, silk or catgut suture and a small opening is left for the passing of urine, menstrual blood and for sexual intercourse. This process is also known as infibulation. Type IV is a recent phenomenon which includes the piercing, pricking and cauterization for tightening or narrowing the vaginal passage (Dorkenoo, *Combating Female Genital Mutilation: An Agenda for the Next Decade*, 1999). The effects of FGM causes trauma due to pain, urinary tract infection, loss of sexual orientation, complications while giving birth etc.

Unheard Cries Behind Closed Doors:

The Dawoodi Bohra is a sub sect of the Shia order under the branch of Islam. Their population accounts to around 1 million and are scattered around various parts of the globe. In India, the community is located in states of Gujarat and Maharashtra. Most of the community people belong to the business class and tend to be secular in their outlook. Women and children from this community enjoy benefits of education as compared to the other community group where education for children especially for a girl child is totally banned or partially allowed till certain age after which she is married off. Even as the Dawoodi Bohra community have a secular understanding towards its people they continue to follow a tradition which questions their outlook, especially towards women. Woman especially girl child from the Bohra community undergo a purity test between the age of 7 and 15 years. Known as Khatna or Khafd, the process includes the removal of the Clitoris either a part or whole. Studies show that women from the Dawoodi Bohra community follow the Type I and Type IV of Female Genital Mutilation among the girls. Though its not a new phenomenon, FGM has arisen as one of the most barbaric acts that destroys the life of the girl child both physically and psychologically.

Religious doctrines and culture of the Dawoodi Bohra community attribute the female genital as "*Haraam ki boti*" or "Immoral lump of flesh" (Pandit, 2017). Therefore removal of the flesh can save the honor of the girl as well as the family. Ironically, the girl has no say in this process but is the sole victim. As the girl child attains the age of 7 years, she has to go undergo the purity process. The surgical process occurs inside a closed room and is practiced by elderly woman with partial or no medical knowledge (Dorkenoo, 1999). Lured by sweets, the girl child is taken inside a dark room, wherein her hands are held and legs opened wide. The elderly woman or "*dai*" performs the purity act using a hot knife or a blade. Once the

process is over the wound is covered with ash and a diaper like cloth to reduce or stop the bleeding (Neeraj, 2018). The physical wound of the victim goes away after a certain period, but the mental and psychological scar stays till the end.

The Muted Voices

Women constitute around 49.51% of the population in the world as per the records by the World Bank, 2017. Yet they do not enjoy the benefits of the basic fundamental rights such as right to life liberty and equality. In Indian context, women from the beginning have been the sole victims of age-old traditions and customs. The structure of the traditions and customs is well scripted by patriarchal ideology. Patriarchy can be seen as system of social structure where in the men dominate, oppress and exploit women (Walby, 1990). Men, in order to maintain their position in the society, continue to exploit women through the means of power and control. Women have been designated the place of a subordinate liability from her birth till death. At the time of birth, she is under the control of her father, during adolescence it is accepted that a brother has to protect her, after marriage it's the husband's duty to support her thus making her dependent on him and finally in old age she has to find her support through her son (Nazeer, 2017). On the contrary, if the woman loses her husband and embraces widowhood, she is ostracized by the community and has to fight for her survival. In this vicious circle of struggle and inequality, a woman is rendered speechless as her voices are lowered or silenced through means of violence by men. Oppressed women prefer to keep quiet as their alternative of raising objections leads to more violent consequences. Women fear from raising their opinions with the fear of the judgmental attitude of the society. A woman's character is questioned when an untoward situation occurs, while a man does not go through the same characterization. A woman tends to defend the honor of self and of her family for which she bears the injustice treatment silently.

In the context of the women who have been victims of the genital mutilation, it is the elderly women who under the name of religion carry out the experiment of purity on the girl child. This act clearly implies that a woman is not the master of her own body. Some of the other reasons for conducting the Khafd among the women is to prevent the sexual preference of the women and increase the sexual preference among men after marriage. As it is seen as a religious trend which has been continuing since ages, mothers prefer to put their child under the process purity as they too underwent in the childhood. However, women continue to remain silence in order to prevent from facing the stigma by the community, particularly by men. one of the reasons for going through the process is to adhere to the age-old religious

doctrines put forth by the clergy (Anantnarayan, 2018). Religious doctrines continue to justify the injustice towards women, as questioning the higher order will eventually lead to excommunication.

Wounds heal, but the scars remain:

This paper deals with certain responses from the victims who have given their testimony when they underwent the act of purification. One of the victim states that the pain she went while her mother and grandmother held her and one of the *dai* finished the process using a sharp nail. What was left behind was blood, pain and a traumatic state which still continues to haunt (STP Team, 2018). Due to lack of medical expertise, the instruments used have been medically proved unfit to carry out the cutting of the clitoris. Experience over expertise has paved way to elderly women or “*dai*” who use hot knife, blade, sharp nails to cut, ash to stop the bleeding and thorns or silk to sew and close the wound. A small gap as much a size of a thumb is left open for passing of urine and menstruation. The wound is opened during sexual intercourse and during the birth of a child. Apart from the physical, it is the psychological trauma that derails the lives of the victims. Trust issues arise as people who at one time were seen as the protectors are the ones who undertook the decision of putting the child undergo the purity test. This further worsens the situation as victims tend to isolate themselves with the fear of being subjected to similar barbaric process (Finke, 2006). Some of the consequences of Female Genital Mutilation among the victims were extreme pain, abscess due to infection, sexual dysfunction. Most of the victims of Female Genital Mutilation have to undergo Caesarean section while giving birth leading to more health complications.

Andha Kanoon:

Though Female Genital Mutilation is not new phenomenon, few cases have been recorded in the eyes of the law. One of the reason's being women safeguarding herself and the image of her family and ultimately the image of the community. The act simply belies the basic rights of a girl child, her right to life, liberty and equality proving it as an offence under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POSCO) Act, 2012. However, the trend is changing though the involvement of NGO's who are gathering women from the Dawoodi Bohra community who had undergone the act of purity to come forward and voice their opinion in stopping this barbaric act (Khullar, 2018). The victims are becoming the voices of people who are afraid to come forward and condemn the act, questioning religious doctrines and placing their petition before the law to decriminalize Female Genital Mutilation as an offence. The struggle has however stumbled upon a

roadblock as it has created a division between people who see it as an offence and those who see it as a religious tenet. The former group see the doctrines the reason for the subordination of women while the later group see it as a denial of their fundamental right to practice and propagate the religion. Since laws are framed on the basis of facts collected, due to less evidence to support the crime the government has provided a deaf ear to the victims of the community. At an international level the United nations have included Female Genital Mutilation as one of the rights through the convention on the elimination on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW). (Nazeer, Addressing the discrimination by United Nation, 2017). Ironically, The UN also signed India as one of the countries that practice Female Genital Mutilation whereas the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India released a report stating practices of Female Genital Mutilation does not occur in India which ultimately does not make India the worst in the world in terms of violence. (Neeraj, Irrefutable proof that khatna exists in India: Genital Mutilation Plagues Thousands of Bohra Women in India, 2018)

Conclusion:

Violence against women continues to tarnish the ideology of equality in the country. Although women constitute second largest group in the world, they continue to face the challenges attributed to oppressed group. Since ancient literature portrays women as subordinate with her roles limited to a nurturer the ideology continues getting accustomed to the contemporary age. Women in the earlier time accepted the injustice paving the way for the inferiorization of womanhood, allowing men to exploit her. Women on the other hand faced the oppression acknowledging it as her duty towards her “*Dharma*” portraying herself as the gatekeeper to the subjection of atrocities by men. With the moving phase and modernization, women have gained their voice and have started to question the rules of Patriarchy. This role of women continues to threaten men, particularly the idea of masculinity. The frustration is thus vented through violence at home, workplace or in the open. Under the name of religion, men continue to subdue the role of women as since the earlier times men have justified their role of controlling women through religious doctrines.

The recent trend sees laws for safeguarding the rights of women from rape, molestation, dowry etc. These are the cases where the victims have come up with their testimony and fought for justice. On the contrary victims of Female Genital Mutilation continue to voice their opinion against the injustice practiced under the name of religion. Victims of Female

Genital Mutilation are currently coming forward and voicing their opinion to abolish the act of purity. Ironically, since men are revered as the protectors of women, particularly her modesty, they have failed to fight collectively for the injustice done to them. Women on the contrary, are fighting for their honor and at the same time the honor of their girl child by getting away with the purity process. Although there are laws that safeguards the basic rights of women, the Government still lacks behind wherein the laws will be based on the interests and choice of the woman serving her interest against the barbaric act of purity in the name of religion. The reality may strike only when the law distances itself from religion and takes a unified stand with secularism providing equal rights to both men and women. Until that happens, the fight against the injustice continues.

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