The Apparel Apparatus: Covert Body-Politics and Violence against Women in India

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Abstract

It is an undeniable fact that crime rates against women has increased to an alarming degree in India over the past few decades. With this alarming condition has risen up the question, where the '*reasons*' behind such situation lie. The increasing number of violent atrocities against women has led to a number of debates in the present day scenario. One very important among them is the responsibility of the women themselves in such cases. Many have blamed the rapid westernization of our country in the past few decades and the changes that entailed them are loosening the moral values of our society. Such changes include the changing roles of the women in our country, such as working outside, having not only a private but also a public life, wearing western clothes etc. Some traditionalist termed these clothes as immoral and provocative to male eyes and should be discarded for they can loosen the moral of the male part of the society. Now the question is how far the women can be responsible for wearing an 'immoral' cloth or even crucial, can a 'cloth' be termed as 'immoral'? What is this 'moral guideline', if any, that the women should follow? Is it even 'moral' to have such a guideline? Or is it another agenda of the hierarchical society to mask the reality colonization behind 'morality'?

I

It is an undeniable fact that crime rates against women has increased to an alarming degree in India over the past few decades. According to the Report – 2018, published by the National Crime Record Bureau India, *"The crime rate per lakh women population is 58.8 in 2018 in comparison with 57.9 in 2017"* (NCRB Report, 2018 available at https://ncrb.gov.in/sites/default/files/Crime%20in%20India%202018%20-%20Volume%201.pdf accessed on 21/08/20). The reported cases of sexual atrocities have increased by 1255.3%, from 2,487 cases in 1971 to 33,707 cases in 2013 (Crime in India 2013, p. 79-88) which is higher than most other leading crime rates in India. With this alarming condition has risen up the question, where the '*reasons'* behind such situation lie. There have been multi-layered attempt made at analyzing and answering this question by different critical thinkers. Some have blamed the rapid globalization leading to a changing socio-cultural economy. Some have argued that our sensitivity towards crimes and violence has changed over the time. It is true that growing awareness and education over the past few decades, especially that of regarding women education and rights, along with the increasing role of media execute an important role in influencing our sensitivity towards crime.

In this context the *'role'* of women in our society has also been questioned. Her changing status i.e. from solely a caregiver inside the house to a striving independent human being has left gaps in our socio-ideological understanding of women. However, most of these arguments have one thing in common; they are somehow directed towards understanding the reasons behind the offender's behavior *('why did s/he behave in an immoral way?')* which is indeed very necessary for research in this field, rather than to know the *'source'* of such behavior. The steady growth in the atrocities against women are making us question if there is a *'pattern'* in our socio-cultural behavior which is influencing our understanding of the status and roles of women and their problems in our society; if we are missing some leading points, or *'gaps'* that are hindering our approach towards the problem as whole. The current paper attempts at analyzing these socio-cultural 'gaps' in the context of our country thus attempts to understand

this situation better. The paper further attempts to analyze if there are ways to bridge these gaps and to give women better freedom over their own body.

As it is nearly impossible to analyze the wide range of atrocities suffered by the women in India within this single context, the current paper will try to focus on those kind of atrocities against women which are rather uncharted and deny them right over their own body and mind, with their 'unconscious consent', the covert body politics that sustains a system of subjugation of our women. The following sections will try to focus on the *'gaps'* between the covert and overt body-politics, and try to analyze through different theories provided by the renowned socio-psychological critics explore why they are avoided with a silent but tacit consent by the society as a whole.

Census report shows that both the number of literate and working women have increased in India. Women are going out of the house, working along with their male counterpart. They have also adapted to the changes that the time required from them. Work has increased the public sphere of their lives. It has also changed their clothing style. Modern Indian women are no longer identified only with sari or salwar-kameez, they have adopted the western clothes for their comfortable working ambiances, and as statement of advanced fashion sense. However, this change has a double agenda. While it has definitely given a semblance of freer mobility to the women, it has also raised the question of social acceptability. Many argue that these western clothes are immoral as they are provocative to male instinct and must be avoided to lessen this kind of atrocity against women.

Now this over simplistic categorization of the cloth into 'moral' and 'immoral' has led to controversies that have no single resolution. The question of 'morality' is closely associated with the question of 'decency' and as they are both relative terms they vary according to the agents who wear them and the receptor who interpret their meaning. To understand this dilemma better a deep perusal of the social condition around us is needed. Many of the institutions (especially the educational ones), has had yet to accept even salwar-kameez a 'decent' enough dress for the female staffs to wear in their institutions, while others (especially in the airline industries) has a completely different outlook. So how to achieve a uniform understanding of the criterion?

II

To understand this problem a close reading of the term 'clothing' and how is it related with the persona and identity of the individual or of the group concerned is needed. Clothing 'the empirical realities of the dressed bodies' (Powel and Gilbert, 2009, p: 1) is not at all synonymous with fashion. Clothing can rather be regarded as a kind of material culture which reflects the lived experience of the body and people's lives (Entwistle 2000a, b, Hansen 2004, Weber and Michell 2004). Hence, it has a significant role in marking the operating distinction, may it be the difference between class, or gender, in the society. It is no doubt a widely accepted fact that clothes have long been used to conceal the sexual difference that the gendered body has. Theorists like Teeslon (1995) and Entwistle (2000a) have accepted gender as undoubtedly one very powerful influence behind fashion. It has a crucial role in reproducing the gender identity by following or rejecting the prevalent moral standard and social acceptability behind it.

Clothing always has had an outstanding role in revealing the individual's desire for self expression. The clothed bodies thus can be regarded as 'tools for self management' (Craik, 1994). So the effort to deduce a person's character and thus to interpret morality on the basis of the clothes they are wearing becomes only natural. However, such deduction of conclusion is never simple as there is a gap between the intention of the wearer and the meaning understood by the observer. Postmodern fluidity and optionality, as Clark and Miller have argued, have given rise to both anxiety and pleasure to the agencies. Hence, the truth can be far from the understanding of the observer. The complex interplay between the desire to fit in and to stand out reflects the anxiety of misinterpretation of the agency. This anxiety of 'misinterpretation' actually is one of the main reasons for the tendency to blame women for wearing the so called 'immoral' clothes. However, it is not the sole reason.

III

I am the Queen, the gatherer-up of treasures, most thoughtful, first of those who merit worship.

Thus Gods have established me in many places with many homes to enter and abide in.

Through me alone all eat the food that feeds them,-each man who sees, breathes, hears

the word outspoken. They know it not, yet I reside in the essence of the Universe. Hear, one and all, the truth as I declare it. (…Rigveda 10.125.3 - 10.125.8 (Klostermaier, 1984, p. 199)

No man, even in anger, should ever do anything that is disagreeable to his wife; for happiness, joy, virtue and everything depend on the wife. Wife is the sacred soil in which the husband is born again, even the Rishis cannot create men without women. (Adi Parva, Mahabharata Book, 1.74.50-51)

It is a real paradox how the condition of the women can dwindle into such a degraded position, in socio-cultural system like that of India where the women have always been accepted with respect as an integral part of the whole. While it is an accepted fact that women do suffer violence on various levels in Indian society but problems occur if we try to analyze the sources and reasons of it on the basis of 'inter-personal or interactional processes'. To find out and analyze critically the other reasons for the booming anxiety between the 'immoral clothing' and 'moral guideline' that the society wants the women to follow, first the process of moral decision making that guide the moral ought for the society must be understood. Kohlberg (1973, p: 630 – 46) suggests a three level model for the moral development that helps to make moral decision and thus helps the moral agent to judge some actions as 'right' and some as 'wrong'. First, on the *pre-conventional* level the moral agent makes moral decision to avoid punishment by the authorities and to satisfy their own needs. It may be taken as the case of the spoken or unspoken rules that are laid down by the traditional hierarchical society and are expected to follow by the members of it. Hence, the women are expected to follow the moral convention of Indian culture and wear only traditional clothing to avoid the scope of punishment if some untoward incidents befall on them. Such moral decision may also be considered as right as it helps the women to avoid the renunciation by the society and thus satisfy their own need as well. The second stage of the model is the *conventional* level of development which is the most common basis for making the moral decision about the clothing of women. In this level the decision is made to obtain the approval of others and thus to preserve in the social harmony. As was discussed earlier, it is natural feeling of the moral agent while choosing clothes to fit in the society rather being the odd

one out in the crowd. It is issued by the natural instinct to follow the law and order of the society. The final stage is *post-conventional* level of moral development where the moral decision to make the right action is inferred from 'internalized personal principles of responsibility' or from the 'principles believed to be universally valid' (Nolan, 1995, P: 118). Hence, here the independent selection of the principles by the moral agent to make a social – moral decision becomes important. It is in this level the choice of the individual becomes problematic.

The individual, in this case a woman, may select a principle of living and choose to live and dress accordingly, but that may conflict with the interest of others. It is not always easy to select the right course of action. In such cases the motive of the wearer becomes important. Depending on the motive of the wearer, even the most traditional dress, such as sari can be worn in an indecent way, and a western cloth can be far more decent. So the 'cloth' itself cannot be categorized simply as moral and immoral. It is rather a means of the motive which can be moral or immoral. Moreover, as the campaign by *Times of India* shows the sexual atrocities on women is no less in the Rural India where women generally wear most traditional dresses than in the Urban India. So this hypothesis as women's immoral clothing being the reason for their violent victimization becomes unreal.

IV

Coming to the latter half of the question proposed earlier in this paper it can be said that, to have a 'moral prescription' to guide women's clothing is rather very difficult. Morality is not a stagnant phenomenon. Morals evolve with time, like our lives in society and the social institutions that we live on with. What may be morally right for one generation may be unacceptable for the other. For example, during the 19th century when the westernization of Indian society brought petticoat, blouse and shoes for the women, the very items which are now considered as a primary essentials, were not accepted. They were considered to be vulgar and corrupting for women even though they covered the body far better than the single length sari. It is very evident from the parodies written by the very famous Bengali Kabiyal of the time Pandit Ishwar Chandra Gupta, Amritalal Bose, Upendranath Das etc. Behind this ridicule, however, was a tendency of reproach mixed with fear. A growing modernization which was supporting women

causes was also entailing changes in the society that were affecting both the private and public lives of people. They were breaking traditions and even trying to change the morals thus altering the way people felt and believed. The very same can be said about the current crisis as well. The globalization is changing our lives very fast. Naturally the women are also becoming a part of this change, and these changes have evolved the morals in our society. So things like petticoats and shoes are no longer corrupting luxuries, but have become unquestioned necessities in modern women's lives. Even the western clothes are also accepted by the greater section of the society as a part of the evolving fashion sense and comfort. Hence, it is hardly possible to have a 'moral guideline' to direct the clothing of women. It is natural then to raise the issue why there is a tendency to morally guide the women's clothing by the current Indian society. Is it only to protect them from the burgeoning violence or just to control their activities further?

V

> Because of our social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different. Women live in such a different economic, cultural, and social world from men that their reactions cannot be understood from a master model developed in male society. (Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p. 33)

It is undoubtedly an accepted fact that clothing is a very sensitive issue for both men and women as its tries to offer legitimacy to social distinction, suggests the character of the wearer which may be morally accepted or condemned by the observer. But while this unacceptance, in case of men remains only at level of disapproval of fashion sense, for women it becomes almost synonymous with her moral virtue. Because cloth, by its close proximity to the body, both conceals and reveals and thus ensues the complex interplay of modesty and sexual explicitness which reveals an inherent part of a woman's whole being. So in terms of clothing, a woman's morality is interpreted rather as 'sexual morality', and thus becomes a burden especially for women. And also such an interpretation of clothing creates distinction among women themselves; - morally acceptable and morally degenerated women, women who conforms to the traditional expectation and women who do not adhere to them. It becomes a tool of social control to preserve the social and moral colonization of women by the prevalent system.

It is right to keep the decorum of modesty in mind while choosing cloth, in case of both men and women. Because morality can never be a one way agenda, if it is applicable to women, it should also be the same for their counterpart in the society. Moreover, no woman ever will want to engage an unwanted or immoral interest which may cause her harm. It is an established fact that to harm other violently is a serious moral and legal offence, and in no way should a victimized woman be blamed for the immoral activities of others. So this myth of immoral clothing as the cause of victimization of women is not morally just or supportable, nor is it acceptable in a society aiming towards equality and harmony. It is only natural to have thoughtful yet contrasting interpretations of moral matters in a society, but that should not lead towards blind prejudices causing indifference to the sufferings and victimization of others because moral plurality and relativity are indispensible for evolving a human society.

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