

Title of the Dissertation:

**Representations of Violence against Women:  
A Study of Selected Indian Fiction**

**SUMMARY**

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# **Representations of Violence against Women:**

## **A Study of Selected Indian Fiction**

### **Summary**

The present research project entitled *Representations of Violence against Women: A Study of Selected Indian Fiction* attempts to critically examine the representations of violence directed against women in a selection of Indian fiction. It focusses on the problematic of gender-based violence which exceeds physical torture and takes the shape of subtle, covert and legitimized forms of violence. The basis of this investigation is the idea of violence as a complex phenomenon which takes a range of colours depending upon the situation in which it takes place. Violence is, in fact, inevitably linked to every aspect of human being's existence. Various thinkers have focussed on the subtleties and complexities of violence. Their theoretical insights reveal violence to be creative, revolutionary, constructive, curative, liberating, destructive, subtle, conspicuous, disguised and/or convoluted. But they have failed to take into account the role played by every person's gender, race, religion and class in her or his experience of violence. In fact, Western theorists have been largely ineffectual in the articulation of violence that targets women belonging to the Third World.

The present study concentrates on the problematic of violence as it impacts Indian women. It undertakes a study of the complexities of Indian

woman's experience of violence. Indian fiction provides ample testimony to this experience. However, no one has attempted a detailed analysis of violence against women as depicted in Indian narratives. The present study examines the representation of violence in selected Indian literary texts written in English as well as those translated into English. The study is carried out, in part, by relating the theories of violence with feminist theory. This theorization of violence is also brought to bear on the violence against women in particular representations in the selected texts in order to pinpoint and articulate various subtle and overt instances of violence.

The first chapter scrutinizes the relevant works of theorists of violence, namely Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Walter Benjamin, Jean-Paul Sartre, Raymond Aron, Albert Camus, Frantz Fanon, Hannah Arendt, Louis Althusser, René Girard, Michel Foucault, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, and Slavoj Žižek. These thinkers have shed light on violence that works on social, political, economic, religious, artistic and existential levels. They have paid serious attention to its diverse forms that are inconspicuous, subtle, complex, destructive, revolutionary, creative and a lot less discernable to the eye than any acts of physical violence. For instance, M. K. Gandhi states that an understanding of non-violence can be achieved through knowledge about violence. In his view, violence is the product of illusion and it is devoid of truth. Violence dehumanizes an individual. In his analysis of the status of law in recent times, Walter Benjamin shows violence as the foundation of all legal institutions. The crux of his theorization is that law is never able to divest itself of its original, founding violence. A study of Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy shows that he

believes violence to be a force of destruction of humanity as well as of human communities. He probes into the violent nature of an individual's personal/existential reality as well as interpersonal/social relationships. He considers violence to be a valid means to gain independence for nations in certain situations, like Algeria, that have been victims of colonial depredations for years. Raymond Aron, however, censures what he considers to be Sartre's blatant glorification of violence. He denounces the humanizing, cathartic, and heroic quality that Sartre attaches to the natives' acts of violence. Albert Camus also emphasizes the negative aspects of any kind of revolution. He analyzes the way modern forms of rebellion which begin as a protest against human suffering eventually end up betraying their origins and justifying the suffering and dehumanization of mankind.

In his treatise on decolonization, Frantz Fanon lays emphasis on violence as the means to restore freedom and democracy in colonized countries. For him, this form of violence is invested with positive and formative features as it forces every individual to respond aggressively to the violence of the colonizer. Hannah Arendt mainly investigates violence that appears in the political domain. She also probes into the equation that power has with violence, which she believes is highlighted only in a government that works on the principle of violent domination. Louis Althusser's analysis of ideology lays bare the manner in which various social institutions exercise formative violence on the unsuspecting individual. Ideology, he argues, plays a major role in sustaining the capitalist relations of exploitation. He sheds light on the misrecognizing aspect of ideology which makes an individual submit freely to her or his subjection. In René Girard's view, violence forms the basis

of all culture. He says that “mimetism” is the cause of reciprocity and repetitiveness of violence that prevails in a community. Mimesis is the tendency to unconsciously imitate the desires of another. In other words, the subject always desires an object which is desired by his rival, thereby giving rise to conflict.

Michel Foucault highlights the power-driven operations that are carried out in society in order to ‘discipline’ the individuals. Here prison is Foucault’s paradigm for the contemporary disciplinary society imprisoned by the norms of various institutions that it has itself created. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt focus on the violent operations of bio-power which aim to not only control the population but produce and reproduce all aspects of social life. Giorgio Agamben reveals the essential “fiction” that underlies the link between the ruling government and the legal order. the present legal order is more involved in making sure that the repressive mechanism of power established in society operates smoothly than executing justice. Furthermore, the violence emanating from these pseudo-legal institutions is consequential in multiplying the asymmetry of power. Slavoj Žižek elaborates on the overt forms of violence manifest in language, and inherent in the economic and political order which relies on subtle approach towards controlling the citizens.

However, the aforementioned theorists have ignored the fact that every act of violence is determined by various factors such as race, class and culture. Moreover, they do not take into account the complexities that gender introduces into an individual’s experience of violence. Violence, to all intents and purposes, is viewed by these theorists as belonging to the male domain.

They analyze violence from a viewpoint that sees man as both the perpetrator and the victim of violence, and so they overlook the implications of violence for women. Or these thinkers neutralize a person's gender and conveniently overlook the fact that violence takes a different shape in its intersection with different sexual categories. Against the absence of a concrete analysis of gender-based violence, feminism affords a cultivated sensibility towards the victimization of woman. Feminism is an amalgamation of the socio-political movements that campaign on issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, equal pay, sexual harassment, gender-based discrimination, and sexual violence. In addition, it is a critical discourse that explores and critiques the concepts of objectification, stereotyping, and dehumanization of women.

The second chapter of the thesis focusses on the theoretical framework of feminism, and gives an overview of the feminists' empirical investigations about the various ways in which violence targets women. This chapter is sub-divided into two parts – Western feminist theory, and Third-World/postcolonial feminism. The theoretical framework of Western feminism is based on the notion of a universalized system of patriarchy, a society-wide structure of power-based relationships in which men exercise domination over women. Here men are accused to be the prime culprits who instigate the suffering perpetuated on women. In this section, various strands of Western feminism are explored, particularly, the manner in which they approach the problems that target women and the subsequent strengths and limitations of their analyses. Western feminist theorists have thrown light on the subjection of women at the social, political, economic, intellectual and existential levels. They also have focussed on the subtle, diverse and ubiquitous form of

symbolic violence which manifests in women's exclusion from the symbolic order manifest in language. But they have wrongly assumed that violence against women is purely gender-specific or the patriarchal. The fact is, however, that patriarchy never takes place in a vacuum; it always intersects with other factors such as race, class, caste and religion, and generates multi-dimensional violence. The dominant Western feminist theory, in fact, does not consider that women belonging to nations with a colonial history may carry other accounts of violence. Third-World feminism is, to some extent, a response to Western feminism's Eurocentric attitude towards women from Third World countries. It is founded on trust in collective struggles for different identities. Postcolonial feminism dwells on issues like slavery, oppression, resistance, representation, race, caste, gender, etc. Moreover, Indian feminists seek 'indigenous' roots of a woman's history for it is shaped by colonialism as well as the various firmly established indigenous cultural traditions. They focus on Indian women's position as a victim of dalit oppression, of feminization and radicalization of Hindu culture, of the current wave of globalization. Nevertheless, Indian feminists are yet to comprehensively explore and properly articulate the experience of violence fraught with complexities associated with Indian women's specific experiences of class, caste, and religion.

However, the aforementioned complexities become visible through an analysis of literary representations. Theorists like Roland Barthes, Edward Said, and Christopher Prendergast, view representation as a form of social practice that is produced within history and material life. Every representation is, in their view, ideology-driven and it must never be construed as something

separable from practical life. Moreover, there is an undeniable power-invested link between literary representations and culture. Literature is never a simplistic reflection of the world. Jacques Derrida views literature as a historical institution both “brought into being and governed” by laws (“Before the Law” 181). However, the texts that come under the literary aegis possess the specific quality of being able to stage, confront and suspend all the presuppositions upon which any kind of social institution rests. Derrida also points out that the uniqueness of a literary work lies in its ability to be put into question as “stable properties and concepts” (181). Hence, select literary texts by nine Indian authors have been brought under scrutiny to map the multiple forms of violence against women. It is an attempt to also address those forms of violence that have remained unaccounted for by feminist theory.

The select Indian fiction includes the novel *Godan* by Premchand (1936), English translation of the short stories penned by Saadat Hasan Manto namely “Colder than Ice” (1950), “The Woman in the Red Raincoat” (1950), “The Price of Freedom” (1953), the novel *And Such is Her Fate* by Dilip Kaur Tiwana (1969), English translation of short stories of Mahasweta Devi namely “Breast-Giver” (1977), “Draupadi” (1981), “Behind the Bodice” (1997), “The Fairy Tale of Mohanpur” (2002), “Five women” (2005), “Kunti and the Nishadin” (2005), “Souvali” (2005), the novel *What the Body Remembers* by Shauna Singh Baldwin (2001), Indira Goswami’s *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (2004), Amita Kanekar’s *A Spoke in the Wheel* (2005), Neel Kamal Puri’s novel *The Patiala Quartet* (2006) and, Anita Rau Badami’s *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2007).

The present study critically examines the aforementioned Indian fiction to systematically elucidate the manner in which patriarchy intersects with caste, class and religion and produces many-hued violence that targets Indian women. It is within these Indian literary representations, in fact, that violence inflicted on women becomes visible in all its complexity, subtlety and diversity. Hence the study carries out a comprehensive analysis of the multi-dimensional violence inflicted upon women as represented in Indian fiction. An attempt has been made to avoid unnecessary imposition of any particular theoretical framework on a text. As a result, certain diversity marks the interpretative responses to specific texts. For instance, the thesis includes the analysis of Mahasweta Devi's short story "Breast Giver" in the light of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the "capitalistic axiomatic." It is the most formidable apparatus of domination which directs the flow of meaning to fixed points and constant relations (478). Capitalistic axioms are, in fact, crucial to the functioning of patriarchy. A close study of "Breast-Giver" reveals that the patriarchal axioms appear in the form of religious allusions like "Lionstead" which is a reference to Durga, the mythological character of Jashoda, also known as the divine mother whose heart brims with forgiveness and selfless love, or the "Mother Cow" revered in Hindu culture. In this narrative, these axioms establish the relation and connection between Jashoda and her victimization. Her breasts receive inscriptions of violence as she is exploited, revered and rejected with reference to them.

Indira Goswami's delineation of the victimization of women belonging to the orthodox *Brahmin* community of Assam reveals the violence of ethic-based religion. Here ethics help in the formation of the artificial link

between religion and morality. Moreover, patriarchy manifest through religion signifies a state of lawlessness – a state of exception. The widows of Kamrup are stripped off their identity, their future, and their entire existence as per the religious norms. Here ethic-based religion is transformed into the force of law, an important concept of Derrida's framework on violence, which no entity or foundation can “contradict” or “invalidate” (*Acts of Religion* 241).

Dalip Kaur Tiwana's narration of the suffering of Bhano shows her to be the quintessential *other* looking for validation and a sense of belonging in people's lives. She yearns to belong to another human being or to someplace within the world. For instance, Bhano chooses the path of suicide to finally unite and belong to the soul of her dead husband, Sarban. Moreover, in an attempt to gain acceptance among her community, Bhano tolerates her second husband's abusive behaviour as well as the disdain of people. In the light of Martin Heidegger's views on belonging, Bhano's need to “belong” is highlighted as an act of inauthenticity. Bhano chooses conformity as a substitute for her constant yet futile attempts at “belonging” in the world. Mechanization and constant activity become the antidote to her overwhelming guilt at falling short of the community including her husband Narain's ideal for femininity. Bhano thus represents the passive yet self-destructive victim of violence trying to “alleviate her suffering existence” through the “hypnotic collective deadening of her sensibilities, of the ability to experience pain” (*On the Genealogy of Morals* 112).

Analyses of select Indian literary texts thus reveal patriarchy to be a complex agency of violence. Patriarchal or gender-based violence is the most lethal for it is legitimized, accepted, and enforced repeatedly. It can be overt,

subtle, physical, psychological, biological or existential. Patriarchy can be construed as an imaginary bond that exists between law and anomie. Patriarchal power is a negative and repressive force that requires the presence of a human body to manifest itself. It operates through violent methods of control, discipline and punishment and, further, culminates in multifarious forms of violence. Control is, in fact, the fulcrum of violence. The patriarchal system of control functions primarily through ideology. There is, indeed, an undeniable relationship between ideology and patriarchy. The present research project sheds light on the role played by ideology in inflicting violence on women. It manifest through social institutions based on different axes of power such as race, caste, class, ethnicity, and religion. The study shows how the dynamics of caste and class transform woman into both the victim and the perpetrator of violence.

The present research project scrutinizes the relevant works by various theorists who explicate violence that works at the social, political, economic, religious, artistic and existential levels. But they do not take into account the violence that specifically targets women. Violence has been an issue in feminist campaigns and struggles. Feminist theory also elaborates on women being the target of violence at the symbolic level. Nevertheless, a comprehensive and theoretical elaboration of violence with reference to women has yet to be undertaken. Moreover, theorists have failed to grasp the significance of Indian women's experience of victimization in understanding violence. The diverse forms of violence undergone by Indian women, in fact, provide new insights to feminist theory. Indian fiction successfully captures and represents the complexities underlying women's experiences of

multidimensional violence with reference to her race, ethnicity and class. It accentuates the fact that Indian women have to suffer diverse forms of violence. Hence the study focusses on a comprehensive and meticulous analysis of the representations of violence inflicted on women in a selection of Indian literary texts. For this purpose, the theories of violence have been aligned with feminist theory and brought to bear upon the literary representations of violence to pinpoint and analyze various subtle and overt instances of violence. These analyses demonstrate that patriarchal violence is complicated by various other axes of power. The present research project is, in fact, an attempt to map a concrete feminist theory that articulates those instances of violence that have been previously ignored or underplayed.