

## **Mother Loving and the Theatrics of Patriarchy**

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Before I embarked upon my liberal arts education, an article was no more than a source of information, something to corroborate with a variety of other bits of pre-existing information. Fast forward through one year and my own response to the process of reading is a fascinating revelation. I find myself being able to trace a certain genealogy of ideas and place them in the context of a larger narrative. One of the prime skills I am coming to acquire is the development of a comprehensive framework within which ideas can flow innovatively. With the aspiration of applying these skills, this essay will attempt to put into conversation ideas of divinity, feminine power and the theatricality of gender using ‘Venus and Adonis’, ‘Dohri Zindagi’ and an article titled ‘The women of Karni Sena And Their Rage Against “Padmaavat”’. Implicit within all these works are ideas which I previously never had the conceptual framework to grasp. The essay will display a two-pronged approach in terms of structure, wherein the article will act as a pivot and the two pieces will broadly deal with the why and how of the article’s contents.

Whilst the popular trope used to describe the source of certain normatively disturbing behaviours is ‘daddy issues’, I would like to propose that in the Indian context, the mother, in particular a divine one, wins on that front. There are few other figures that are more glorified and eulogised by film, literature and media than that of the self-sacrificial, persevering mother whose qualities are sized up to divine proportions. From Mehboob Khan’s classic ‘Mother India’ to the more recent ‘Mom’ starring the late Sridevi, there lies something in the figure of a mother that for us Indians is almost out of reach of the human, which is to say something

which is ideal, infallible and consequently in many regional narratives, divine. The comparison of female politicians to mother figures is commonplace. Indira Gandhi, for example, was revered by many as a manifestation of *shakti*. This computation of feminine power is solely derived from the successful execution of two roles – that of an ideal wife, and even more so that of an ideal mother. A chimeric problem is bound to arise when feminine power is fit to suit only a certain kind of prescriptive narrative. In the article ‘Padmaavat,’ Manjushree Shaktavat states that ever since she took up protesting she has become the ‘busiest person in the family’ (Bordia). If one attempts to rephrase that statement in order to make the meaning more explicit it would perhaps sound something along the lines of ‘I am now undertaking as much work as any man in my family’. The implicit indication reasons that the only other way a woman can be powerful is by being a man. To put it simply, a woman who is not a mother or a wife is powerful in masculinity never in femininity.

One of the comments on the article by an inhabitant of Udaipur states that conventionally they referred to Padmavati as ‘Rani Padmini’ but after Bhansali’s film they call her ‘Ma Padmavati’ (Bordia). One is forced to question why the qualities of a mother are bestowed upon a mythical queen who has seemingly little to do with motherhood. The answer lies in the boldly complacent reasoning that the figure of a mother lies above and beyond any sexual desire. A mother has to necessarily be pure, self-sacrificing and above the reach of basal desires. Making Rani Padmini into ‘Ma Padmavati’ veils her from the male gaze in a manner which the *ghungat* never can. Furthermore, it catapults her into the most powerful female figure that the Indian imagination can conjure. In the fabric of Indian literature and mythology all female goddesses are automatically assigned the prefix of Ma in order to desexualise them. Needless to say, that the same reasoning does not apply to their male counterparts. To protect her from the slander that the Rajputs believe she’s being subjected to, Padmavati is deified and mothered. The principle problem in the manner in which the mother figure is made divine lies

in the complete lack of space given to her to err in any manner. Such expectations fail to account for the fact that women are also human beings who err and who have desires beyond their maternity or I daresay, conceive of their maternal duties in a way different from the norm. The biggest irony lies in the fact that Padmavati is most definitively sexualised by none other than the Rajputs themselves. By investing so much effort to protect her from sexualisation and debasement, the Rajputs highlight that there is something decidedly sexual about her which needs to be silenced and covered. The dichotomy lies in the fact that a woman is so sexualised that she has to necessarily be placed above and beyond the body in itself to be dissociated from desire and objectification. The act of Jauhar reflects the sexualisation of the female form. If women were simply concerned with saving themselves the horror of rape and ravage any other means of death would have sufficed. The act of Jauhar, however, rids them of a body altogether such that no man could set eyes on their form or mutilate them post mortem. This behaviour plays into the normative view wherein a woman's physicality is never thought of devoid of sexualising her body.

There is perhaps no one who has explored questions about the gender roles more creatively and sensitively than Shakespeare. If one reads 'Venus and Adonis' versus 'Padmaavat', the literary role played by Venus is one of the established and active character who takes the narrative forward whilst the role of Padmavati is more symbolic than character oriented. In Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis, Venus's divinity is not removed from her sexuality and sexual agency. If Padmavati is given a divine stature because of her desexualisation, Venus as a goddess of love is divine in her sexuality. Her role as the pursuing lover, overtly expressing her desires is traditionally characteristic of the male character. Even though Venus is executing a traditionally masculine role, she is masculine only in her forwardness. Shakespeare raises a provocative 'what if' of gender roles by not only switching gender roles but in a certain sense transforming them altogether to give birth to a new kind of

femininity. C.S Lewis is incredibly uncomfortable with how ‘soft and plump’ Venus is, not because she is masculine but because she doesn’t fit his ideal of femininity. Patriarchy is threatened by the kind of feminine autonomy displayed by Venus simply because of how earthy, sensual and utterly real she is in comparison to the tall ideals of divine purity which oppress ordinary women on a daily basis. The deification of Padmavati and of the mother figure in general is not an exaltation but dehumanisation. Venus provides a prime example of an alternative module of feminine authority and power, one which celebrates human traits and desires freely rather than suppressing them.

The manner in which homosexual desire is approached in the Padmaavat article is interesting because it uses the process of negation. A young student of Chittor claimed that even the maids of Queen Padmini had not seen any part of her body save for her ankles (Bordia). Manjushree Shaktavat claims in clear terms that Rajput women danced only in the presence of women and that too in full *ghungat* (Bordia). Most significantly, a keynote point of discomfort for the Rajput community arises from the song “Ghoomar” wherein Deepika Padukone’s legs become visible. Not only do these instances posit questions about what kind of framework the Rajputs have for homosexual desire but it goes one step further by making the body of the queen an object to be revered through ignorance. This statement plays into the trend in Indian mythological narratives wherein no one sets their eyes on a woman who is in a position of great reverence, mostly because she is either another man’s wife or the desexualised mother. A classic example would be that of Lakshman and Sita wherein the stories claim that even after fourteen years Lakshman was unaware about Sita’s features because he never looked onto her face whilst speaking to her.

An interesting dimension of the protests voiced by the women of the Jauhar Kshatrani Manch lies not only in the object of the protest but also in the manner in which the protest was executed. Rajasthan was and continues to be a deeply conservative state wherein institutions

like caste and gender have a deep-rooted influence. The institutional oppression of caste and gender find a performative expression at the level of the individual. Power becomes tangible and palpable through tapping into the theatricality of clothing and demonstrations. The theatricality of institutional oppression is made glaringly evident in the act of protesting. Since women are expected to dress a certain way, direct correlation implies that their protests too will be of a certain nature, distinctly different from that of their male counterparts. After all, these women protested not just as offended members of the Rajput communities but as *kshatranis* (female warriors). The binary along which the roles of men and women are distributed demarcates the public as the sphere of the man and the private as the sphere of the woman. In such a context it is interesting to note the manner in which a protest, which belongs to the sphere of the public, takes on a feminine character. Since masculinity lies in the domain of the status quo, possessing masculine qualities becomes a source of pride. The pattern followed by institutional oppression, be it that of caste, class, gender or race, always sets the qualities of the powerful as the ideal. The institution of racism has a clear-cut place it gives to a black man in a white world. However, as whiteness is the ideal the black man would still aspire to gain the qualities of a white man in order to move closer to the status quo. Similarly, the institution of patriarchy has a rigid space which it gives to a woman inhabiting a man's world but since masculinity is the status quo, a woman is aspiring to be a man just to be more powerful.

The protestors display an acute awareness as far as the power of drama is concerned. Whilst being photographed the women of the Jauhar Kshatrani Manch are conscious of the fact that they had to look like *kshatranis* and hence hold the sword in their hands. They even dress in the totality of their bridal finery which is an outfit reserved for festivals and weddings donning *lehengas*, *odhnis*, *rakhris*, *bajubands* and *hathphools*. If these women were attempting to look powerful, they don garments which are characteristic of a successful marriage indicating the fact that they were successful in the most significant endeavour of their lives.

The 'visual drama' (Bordia) of their get up and their declaration of committing Jauhar got them into national headlines. Theatrics is of utmost importance in the exercise of any power structure. The analogy of theatrics holds true for the institution of gender. Gender is highly political and contentious because it is performative. Gender is not performative because it is political rather it becomes political because it is performative. If one's gender and more importantly the perception of one's gender were steeped in biology such contention would not arise. The question of possessing 'manhood' or 'womanhood' where it really 'counts' (Detha 146) would not even arise because biology is more permanent and beyond the reach of alteration in comparison to performance. Gender is contentious because the theatricality of it grants it a flexibility wherein one can be a man or a woman, or none, in many ways. Such mobility threatens hierarchical distribution of power.

'Dohri Zindagi' demonstrates a fabulous example of the performative role in gender identification. Not only does it depict gender as a performative role, but it also complicates the issue of whether or not biological gender gives birth to innate tendencies. The question of where one derives their masculinity or femininity is complicated using, say, the moustache as the prime example of manliness. Beeja is confident in her role as a man because she has an angarkhi and a turban which is sixteen hands long. Her behaviour remains largely unchanged until she is biologically transformed into a man by the spirit chief after which she seems to be gripped by lust and possession. The issue of gender identity is, however, pertinent throughout the text because it never provides any clear answer regarding what constitutes gender. This text throws light on why cross dressing makes people so uncomfortable. Cross dressing taps into the fluid performative space of gender which threatens social reproduction. The principal reason why the men of the village are threatened by Beeja and Teeja's love is because the hierarchical power structure working in their favour was preserved through the social reproduction of norms

and customs. If Beeja and Teeja use performance to make a mockery of patriarchal norms and toxic masculinity the women from the Kshatrani manch use the same to do the exact opposite.

Power, much like sexuality, is not something which is removed from us but housed within the bounds of the body. Sexual freedom is as important and as threatening as intellectual freedom. The reason why intellectual discourse is shut down in authoritarian regimes is not different from the reason why people in certain hierarchical power structures are not permitted to have sexual relations. Power is housed as much in the body as it is in our words and minds. Most importantly both power and sexuality are borne of fluidity and change. Sexuality is threatening to hierarchy because it fundamentally alters where and how power is housed. In conclusion, for better or for worse, I do not think I have the capability to read anything without intellectualising it anymore.

### Works Cited

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