

Representation of Rape in *Sabitri Upakhyan*

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to problematize the way a rape victim's life story has been depicted in Hasan Azizul Huq's novel *Sabitri Upakhyan* (The Chronicle of Sabitri). The protagonist of the novel is a sixteen year old girl called Sabitri and the central theme is the series of incidents that changed her life forever: the abduction, repeated rape and the aftermath of rape. The way Sabitri is portrayed and her torture is described objectifies her and the author's attempt to arouse pity for her is a male chauvinist approach to react to one special rape case among the innumerable reported and unreported others. The graphic details of the sexual violence and the tragedy of Sabitri's life becomes the source of sadomasochism on the author's part. My argument is that the male chauvinism is expressed not only by eroticizing the protagonist but also by dehumanizing the criminals to prove that the rapists are not normal male members of the society. This proposition trivializes men's crime against women.

Keywords: Rape, representation, misogyny, male chauvinism, objectification

1. Introduction

Sabitri Upakhyan (2013) is the second novel by Hasan Azizul Huq, one of the most celebrated and reverend fiction writers of our time. This novel tells the story of a rape victim named Sabitri who was abducted and repeatedly raped by villagers namely Bota, Sabur and Durga. The quest of this paper is to present a critical analysis of the novel and show how the narrative of the novel depicts the tragedy of Sabitri's life by objectifying the victim, portraying the rapists as beasts and representing rape in a way that links rape with sexual desire. I would like to argue that sexualizing a rape victim is a male chauvinistic approach and treating rapists as anything other than normal human male of the species is problematic since rape is a crime to establish power, not a way to gratify one's sexual desire. Thus, representation of Sabitri's rape is flawed and objectionable.

In the dedication page the author asks Sabitri Debi for forgiveness and in certain parts and at the end of the novel a few documents of the rape case

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that was filed in the court have been added. From these two things we can assume that the event was true although all the characters are not real ones, the author added fictitious characters and events to rectify the plot. The plot's being based on a real event requires more serious consideration though the novel in question is a work of fiction. The author himself wants this chronicle to be read as fact than fiction.

Virginia Woolf in chapter six of "A Room of One's Own" states that "Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought. But it would be well to test what one meant by man-womanly, and conversely by woman-manly" (98). The apology offered by the author shows that he considers himself as a representative of the male who commit the crime against humanity by raping any woman. I would like to argue that the author's point of view remains a masculine one throughout the novel. Hasan Ferdous in his essay 'Bedonay Bhora Peyala' (A Cup Full of Pain) opines that this novel is not a description of rape, rather an attempt to make the audience go through the 'fear, endless cry and barbaric pain' that the girl called Sabitri had to undergo (Par 3). Hasan Ferdous also opines that this apology makes the author stand as a humane person as the representative of all the men of the world who have conscience. By saying that the novel is 'not a description of rape' Hasan Ferdous wants to state that there is no graphic detail of the rape scenes to give the audience any erotic pleasure, rather the pain and misery that the girl suffered from during and after the rape is the central issue of the novel. This statement can be debated over and in this paper, I would beg to differ from this opinion. I would like to identify three major male chauvinist approaches that the author has adopted while narrating Sabitri's life story. Those are as follows:

Firstly, the graphic details of the crime committed against Sabitri. The detailed description of the Sabitri's abduction and repeated rape gives the audience an opportunity to get a kind of voyeuristic pleasure usually presented in rape stories newspapers publish to increase their sell. This tendency is misogynistic.

Secondly, sexualizing Sabitri and objectifying her before and after the crime. The way Sabitri's beauty and sex appeal have been depicted in the novel clearly shows that the author sees the protagonist from a male's point of view. From Virginia Woolf's argument that "it is fatal to be purely a man or a woman pure and simple" (104) we know that if authors cannot keep their sex aside, it can create bias and the result can be dangerous. In the novel, the

author's perspective is not only male but also male chauvinistic despite his attempt to create empathy and compassion for the protagonist.

Dehumanizing the rapists and presenting the crime as a sexual act is the third flaw that I believe that the author made while representing the rape of Sabitri, a real-life event in a fictitious structure. Of course, rape is a crime based on sexual violence but the violence is associated more with power and less with sexual desire or lust. In the novel, the rapists are portrayed as sex hungry beasts instead of normal human male, which is problematic in understanding the crime as a social phenomenon.

2. Nature of rape as a crime against women

Susan Brownmiller in her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* analyzes rape as a crime based on sex but not solely depending on lust or desire. She says that in ancient time rape had been a tool to conquer a woman's body as a process of securing inheritance or estate but in modern time it is a display of male power over female body. Nevertheless, as a crime it differs from assault or robbery.

When rape is placed where it truly belongs, within the context of modern criminal violence and not within the purview of ancient masculine codes, the crime retains its unique dimensions, falling midway between robbery and assault. It is, in one act, both a blow to the body and a blow to the mind, and a "taking" of sex through the use of threat or force. Yet the differences between rape and an assault or a robbery are as distinctive as the obvious similarities. In a prosecutable case of assault, bodily damage to the victim is clearly evident. In a case of rape, the threat of force does not secure a tangible commodity as we understand the term, although sex traditionally has been viewed by men as "the female treasure"; more precisely in rape the threat of force obtains a highly valued sexual service through temporary access to the victim's intimate parts, and the intent is not merely to "take" but to humiliate and degrade (Brownmiller 378)

In her essay "Sex Crimes and the Media" Tanya Sirisier states that most rape cases go unreported and the reported ones are also roughly divided into two categories, "Real" rape and "Simple" rape. According to the Bangladeshi law, married and sexually active women are 'unrapable' because of the two-finger test used to verify a victim's complaint. In her essay 'Kebol Sotiri Dhorshon Hoy' (Only virgins can be raped) Fatama Sultana Suvra showed how married rape victims lose their credibility since women who have sexual experience cannot be identified as raped because of

the test (Suvra 29). From Brownmiller's analysis it is found that this is a common phenomenon during the prosecution- "Not only is the victim's response during the act measured and weighed, her past sexual history is scrutinized under the theory that it relates to her "tendency to consent", or that it reflects on her credibility, her veracity, her predisposition to tell the truth or to lie" (Brownmiller 385)

3. Representation of rape in the novel

In the novel the author gives a detailed description of the crime against the protagonist. Sabitri is portrayed as a beautiful and desirable young girl and the abductors are presented as sex hungry wild beasts. In this part of the paper, I would try to show how the author does that and why it is problematic.

(i) Description of rape

At this point, I would like to quote certain portions of the novel where Sabitri's rape is narrated. The portions I am referring here are translated by myself. There is a five-page description of how Sabitri is abducted and taken to the outskirts of the village.

"He grabs Sabitri by his two hands and lie down on the sand. Bota, hold her hands, Sobur, you hold her legs. Hold first, then we'll see. It's hard work. They forgot their hunger. Sabitri can only shake her head now, striking the back of her head on the sand she pleases, no, no, please don't ruin me."

Here, the audience is given a detailed description of the crime. The author takes the readers to the crime scene and makes them witness the whole action which I find problematic.

"Durga Das became extremely annoyed and said to Bota, can't you just shut her mouth up? Seat on her hands, press her mouth. The task goes on very slowly. Durgapodo is making Sabitri lie down perfectly. He spreads Sabitri's legs calmly by himself. Then getting seated on her naval, Sabur slowly bends her knees, her sharee is flown away by now and got stuck on a mound, flying like a flag of blood"

Let us momentarily consider this part necessary for the description of the suffering and go on to the next-

"Durga carefully lies down on Sabitri. A sharp steely spear tears up the transparent membrane and reaches the end of the butter. Sabitri screams one last time. The only pure and brief death scream of the world." (Huq 35) I would like to attract the attention of the readers to a few words. From the

earlier paragraph, it is ‘task’ and from the latter, ‘carefully’ and ‘butter’. There are other words like ‘slowly’ and ‘perfectly’ which refers to and modifies the crime which the author calls the ‘task’. Before going to the description the author compares Durgapado’s bending to a ‘pranam’ which is usually used to show honor to any deity the devotees worship. There is a psychological conflict among the tree rapists about who would take the first turn. All these narrations resemble the way tabloids cover ‘rape story’ that increases their sell. Stuart Hall in his Representation Theory suggests three approaches to explaining how representation of meaning through language works, the third approach being constructionist where “the social actors who use the conceptual system of their culture and the linguistic and other representation system to construct meaning” (Hall, 25). Here, the specific words used by the author shows the male bias on the author’s part. The representation of rape is traditional and necessarily male chauvinistic where women are treated as commodity.

In another Bangla novel titled *Nekre Aranya* written by Shaukat Osman in 1972 uses beast metaphor to describe the perpetrators, Pakistani Army in this case, which, Madhurima Sen finds sexist and patriarchal while arguing that the novel depicts the sexual violence from a male perspective (Sen,). She also argues that in many other fictions including *Nekre Aranya* the authors make their female characters commit suicide to eliminate the victims of sexual violence instead of interrogating the socio-cultural attitude towards them. This is because the consequence of rape is to live in shame for a woman in South Asia.

(ii) Sexualizing Sabitri

In her essay, “Rape and Its Representation: "Male Myths of Rape" and English Literature, Part Two”, Kaoruko Sakata showed how Thomas Hardy sexualized Tess before she was raped by Alec. She calls it ‘Hardy’s textual manipulation’ and argues that by portraying Tess as a seductive and desirable woman the narrator justifies the crime. In *Sabitri Upakhyan*, we can see how Hasan Azizul Haque makes Sabitri a sex object while depicting her beauty. At the age of eight, Sabitri used to wear sleeveless frock and flimsy panty, the omniscient narrator says that it left Sabitri ‘almost naked’. When Sabitri starts menstruating, the narrator describes her breasts as ‘man’s edible, child’s food’. These descriptions are not all, he furthers the objectification by using Nishibala’s (the house help) point of view. Nishibala seeks Sabitri’s permission to run her finger between her breasts to examine the size of them. These, of course, sexualize Sabitri and present her as a desirable woman in

front of the male readers. These details are erotic and leaves the readers imagine her as a seductive woman. Even during the very act of rape, Sabitri's breasts are compared to a pair of lotus. (Huq 31) The way Sabitri's beauty and charm have been depicted by the author is enough to objectify the protagonist, the way this rape victim Sabitri is eroticized here reflects what Sakata calls 'textual manipulation' about Hardy's treatment of Tess. What Huq does here is to offer a point of view that is necessarily male and also gives the opportunity of what Laura Mulvey calls 'male gaze'.

In the essay, "Sex crime and the Myth" Tanya Sirisier shows how media represents rape as a crime while dividing the victims into two groups, the first one is 'virgins' or 'innocents' and the second is 'vamp' who might have provoked rape by their outfit or attitude. Fatema Sultana Suvra in her essay "Sotiri Kebol Dhorshon Hoy: Sakkhyo Ainer 155(4) Dharar Samajik Bastobota" (Only Virgins Can be Raped: The Social Reality of Witness Law 155(4)) shows how a medical test can very effectively deny a rape victim's claim if she is married, has sex experience previously or has children. Even, Suvra states, the existing law can decide by some physical symptoms that the girl is older and has sexual experience. From Suvra's work we also know that this law is a colonial one and it can be assumed that in Sabitri's case, same law applied. Since a rape victim's being virgin is a must, most of the rape victims are likely not to get justice when the case is disputed in the court. Sabitri, though married, had to be virgin in order to be a 'real' and/or 'innocent' rape victim which is why the author shows that she had no previous sex experience after two years of starting menstruating. The author also presents the court records to prove that she was a virgin before her abduction. At this point, I would like to argue that choosing one rape victim among many reported and unreported others is a deliberate decision by the author since the primary goal is to arouse pity and compassion for the victim. And to serve this purpose, the victim's being virgin is a must because otherwise, the victim can be categorized to be in the second group suggested by Sirisier, a 'vamp' who might have provoked the rape.

In her essay 'The Great Indian Rape Trick- I', Arundhoti Roy shows how Shekhar Kapoor's film *Bandit Queen* made Phoolan Devi a One Man Woman by eliminating all her lovers and picking up only one so that the audience consider her a 'nice' woman and an 'innocent' rape victim. If Phoolan's promiscuity or rage against her husband's second wife would have been visualized, nobody would have pitied her. According to Roy, "*Bandit Queen*- the film, does not make a case against Rape. It makes its case against Rape of *nice* (read moral) women." (Par 12) While portraying a female

character as a rape victim, male authors and film makers maintain these two things most of the times- first thing is that she is a virgin and the second is that she is a 'nice' woman i.e. morally perfect one despite being raped and losing her virginity. In *Sabitri Upakhyan*, Huq also tries to arouse pity for her showing that she was an innocent virgin since her being 'not virgin' would have failed to present her as a pitiable victim. The author chose Sabitri's case because Sabitri herself claimed in the court that she had been a virgin. Sabitri's case being special among so many other reported and unreported ones is the very fact that she had been a virgin. This tendency is to show empathy to only virgin girls is not only problematic but also male chauvinistic. By selective empathy towards the virgin rape victims, the male chauvinistic society negates the other entire rape victims' credibility and trustworthiness. Like Roy states, this book also makes it's case against the rape of 'innocent' women, not a case against the very crime.

Andrea Dworkin in her book *Woman Hating* says that worship of virginity is "a real sexual perversion" and shows how religion institutionalizes the worship of virginity, "The worship of virginity must be posited as a real sexual perversion, crueller and more insidious than those sex models condemned by the culture as perverse. The Christian institutionalization of that worship, its cultivation and refinement, have aborted women in the development and expression of natural sexuality by giving credence to that other: woman as whore. The dualism of good and evil, virgin and whore, lily and rose, spirit and nature is inherent in Christianity and finds its logical expression in the ritual of sadomasochism" (Dworkin 73) Hasan Azizul Huq tries to arouse contempt for Sabitri only because she is an innocent rape victim, a virgin one. Again, her being beautiful and desirable makes her more worthy of receiving the audience's sympathy and proves the popular opinion that rape is a crime committed by men mainly because of the sexual desire.

(iii) Portrayal of rapists as monsters or sex starved male:

While describing Sabitri's perpetrators Haque gives two contradictory notions. One is that he compares the rapists to wild beasts and again, he informs the readers that one of the rapists was hungry for sex because of the monthly sickness of his wife. Both these notions interpret and present sexual violence in a wrong way.

Firstly, if we consider that rape is a crime committed by the monsters coming from outer space and not born and raised in the very society we live in, we actually fail to get to the real reason behind this crime mostly committed

against women and young children. Leslee Udwin, the British filmmaker who made a documentary on the 2012 Delhi gang rape case, popularly known as 'Nirbhaya Case' told in an interview that while making *India's Daughter* she discovered that the convicts were perfectly normal people with very much sound state of mind. Even their psychiatrists also declared that they are not abnormal or mentally imbalanced persons. The way they acted was only the outcome of what the society taught them about women and not the aberrations in their nature. According to Udwin, the rapists themselves are not the disease, they are only the symptoms. The crime has its root in the common tendency of human society where women are treated as less than human and abducting and raping them cannot be considered as a morally wrong deed. Udwin also added that Nirbhaya's (Her real name was Jyoti Singh) perpetrators absolutely lacked any sense of remorse and seemed to be perplexed why they were facing such harsh punishment when "everybody is doing it".

Describing rapists as 'wolves', 'beasts' or 'monsters' is a way to trivialize the common tendency of male population and overlook the responsibility of the society which taught men that women's consent is not important and they can do whatever they want with the less powerful people, women, children or weaker men. Hasan Ferdouse also admits in his essay that the author refuses to consider the perpetrators as humans. This refusal is problematic because rapists do not lack the normalcy as humans, rather they lack the understanding of and the respect for women and their desire. Male chauvinist society tends to deny the fact that rapists are also normal human males who defy the rights of women to say 'no' during the advances from males. Secondly, rape is more about violence and power practice than about sex. Brownmiller in her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* opines that no zoologist, as far as she knows, ever observed that animals rape in their natural habitat. She said, "Sex in the animal world, including those species that are our closest relations, the primates, is more properly called "mating", and it is cyclical activity set off by biological signals the female puts out. Mating is initiated and "controlled" it would seem, by the female estrous cycle. When the female of the species periodically goes into heat, giving off obvious physical signs, she is ready and eager for copulation and the male become interested. At other times there is simply no interest and no mating" (Brownmiller 13) By relating men's sexual hunger to their tendency to rape is a dangerous proposition, it legitimizes and even justifies their urge to abduct and sexually exploit a woman giving them an excuse to do this heinous crime. Sex between a man and a woman is an interactive process

where both find pleasure and gratification, rape is a one party's torture on the other. Men do not find sexual gratification by raping a woman, what they get is a sense of power and a "false notion of masculinity" (Brownmiller 391) By portraying the rapists as sex hungry animals, Huq represents rape in a flawed way denying the fact that all three rapists are normal humans and the crime is related to their aggressive masculinity, not to their lust or sexual desire.

A Nicholas Groth in his book *Men Who Rape: The Psychology of the Offender* identifies three categories of rape, power rape, anger rape and sadistic rape. He also claims "To describe the rapist as oversexed is not only an over simplification but not at all accurate. Rape is, in fact, not an expression of sexual desire as much as it is an expression of other, nonsexual needs. Rape is never the result simply of sexual arousal that has no other opportunity for gratification." (Groth 5) In *Sabitri Upakhyan*, the rapists talked about their sexual hunger, and the author repeatedly compared the crime as an act of 'eating' or 'feasting' (Huq 34). This is an outcome of rape culture that presents rape as a 'crime of irrational, impulsive and uncontrollable lust' when in reality it is the perpetrators 'deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession of a would-be conqueror' (Brownmiller 391). The author also called the perpetrators lions, wolves and tried to present them as anything other than humans. This tendency of treating rapists as beastly creatures eventually trivializes the crime as separate incidents and does not hold the male population responsible for their misogynistic behavior.

4. Conclusion

Although it is undeniable that a single experience of rape can change a woman's life forever and compels her to live under the trauma for the rest of her days, and in *Sabitri's* case, the author focuses on that agony and pain *Sabitri* had to undergo, the representation of the crime is depicted in such a way that it arouses pity and compassion towards her as a person and presents the case as a special one. By doing so, the author overlooks the social reality of rape as a crime, the depiction of a real event becomes a fictional tale where *Sabitri's* rape is treated as something extremely tragic and thus, the social reality of this crime against so many other women loses seriousness. To create credibility of *Sabitri's* rape the author presents her as a virgin since a married and sexually active woman's rape cannot arouse that much pity in the minds of the audience. Moreover, the sexualized narration of *Sabitri's* body and the three page long graphic details of the violence against *Sabitri*

make it clear that the protagonist is eventually presented as a sex object and the incident as a sexual act. Dehumanizing the perpetrators also serves the purpose of convincing the audience as though rape is not a social reality which makes the male practice their masculine power on women, children or weaker men, instead it presents the crime as a fairy story where some monsters attack the beautiful unfortunate heroine in order to satisfy their sexual hunger.

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