

# The Intersection of Masculinity and Rape Culture: Studying the Novel *The Temple Bar Woman* in Feminist Lens

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**Abstract:** *The novel The Temple Bar Woman by Sujatha Parashar published in 2018 serves as a literary depiction of the occurrence of rape and its aftereffects in current Indian culture. The protagonist of the novel, Radha, is abducted, raped, and thereafter confined to an upmarket brothel known as the Temple Bar. The work exhibits the factors behind the causality of rape as an event of exerting power through masculinity by the perpetrator. Susan Brownmiller's theory redefined rape as a tool of patriarchal oppression rather than a simple expression of human desire, challenging dominant perceptions and examining sexual violence throughout history and cultures. The primary cause contributing to Radha's rape in the story is the patriarchal dominance of the perpetrators, further exacerbated by their influence in the political system. The paper seeks to examine the rape culture that powers perpetrators' masculinity and to show how Radha tackles her life as a survivor following the rape crime from a feminist point of view.*

**Key Words:** Rape, Women, Culture, Masculinity, Power.

## 1. INTRODUCTION :

Traditional ideas of masculinity are strongly associated with rape culture. It fosters damaging gender stereotypes that associate masculinity with sexual violence and domination over women. Men are put under more pressure to pursue and conquer women sexually. Rape is fundamentally linked to patriarchy and dominant male-centric societal structures. Consequently, rape, as an act of sexual violence against women, serves as a tool for asserting authority and engendering a sense of dominance (Sullivan 76). *The Temple Bar Woman* is a notable literary representation of an event of rape, where the victim Radha, represents many such survivors in India. Radha is a young woman, a dedicated teacher and a cherished daughter of Krishnakanth, the principal of a rural school named Eklavya Madhyamik Vidhyalaya. The tranquil existence of Radha was shattered when she responded to a situation of street harassment. When she went to Satrangi Mela, the local carnival along with her friend Seema, she happened to encounter the perpetrator, Vikram Singh. He eve-teases Radha in the crowd by purposefully dashing her. Radha recognised his endeavour, yelled at him and smacked his face. "Instead of backing out, she looked up at him, smiled coyly and without a blink, raised her hand and slapped him hard across his face" (Parashar 17). When Radha retaliated against the street harassment, Vikram Singh's fragile male ego was shattered. This creates the turn of events in the novel, he abducts Radha with the help of two other men and gang rapes her. The event of rape in Radha's life flips her entire existence when she was forcefully put in a brothel for prostitution. The reason behind the infliction of assault is purely intentional, to exert power, to prove who is superior during a conflict.

This paper attempts to discuss how power is a tool used to coerce a woman in an Indian cultural setting. Susan Brownmiller, a feminist critic, her theory of rape reconceptualised rape as an instrument of patriarchal subjugation rather than mere human desire, contesting prevalent beliefs and scrutinising sexual violence throughout history and cultures. With this view, her theory on sexual assault has evolved and various intersections were developed later to address the speakability of rape. Feminist interventions around the rape discourse declared that rape is mostly a gender-based violence and it is fuelled by hegemonic masculinity. A

fragile male ego does not allow a woman to stand up for herself and when she does that, a Man, everything in his power asserts his dominance over that woman.

## 2. Radha- Victim of Power Consciousness and Fragile Masculinity

Brownmiller argues that rape is an exercise in power and that the purpose of rape is “nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear” (Brownmiller 15). Vikram Singh initially wanted to abduct Radha, leave her stranded and scare her for slapping him, that too for his perversity. But his male fragility insinuated him to perform something more than just instilling fear in the victim. They were just supposed to teach the girl a lesson, scare her and drop her off at the lonely highway to find her way back home (Parashar 25). Vikram’s socially constructed masculinity is tested when a woman slaps hard on his face. Fragile masculinity comes from studies that experimentally reduce men’s confidence in their manhood. Manhood threat is most often induced by insinuating that the participant is high in femininity (Di Mucchio & Knowles 26). Radha standing up for herself outraged him, making him commit such a heinous crime.

An apparent defiance of reverence and subservience by women is penalised by the cruellest act of men. In this way, being a nice human being has come to mean being weak. Men are very focused on showing their strength, especially when that strength is used against women. This has made their ideas of what it means to be a man weak, making them easily hurt by women who do not care about or touch their fragile egos. The debate around rape in the culturally diverse nation firmly permeated Indian households following the notorious Delhi rape case of Nirbhaya (Sullivan 74). In India, rape myths significantly influence attitudes and actions around sexual assault, sometimes grounded in entrenched cultural traditions. Confronting these assumptions is seen as essential for comprehending rape as a kind of extreme violence and improving support for survivors.

Rape has historically been more common in settings where the perpetrator benefits from institutional dominance, such as feudalism, slavery, or war, or at police stations where the victim is frequently too intimidated by the authority figure’s power to object (Armstrong et. al 21). The perpetrator in the novel is one such where he escapes from the law and order through his political influence. Only after nearly two decades of the victim’s secret ploy and studious efforts, the perpetrator Vikram Singh is deemed as Radha’s rapist and is driven under law and order. *The Temple Bar Woman* vividly demonstrates the principles of Brownmiller’s rape theory, which defines rape as an exertion of power, even though it is set in modern times, specifically in India. Rape as a gender-specific crime is universal and the rape culture in India is a major influential factor in such crime. Despite the novel’s dramatic elements where Radha seeks help from the Brothel administrator Habiba Bi, becomes a powerful politician, and takes her revenge on her rapist Vikram Singh who later turns out to be an even more powerful politician, its social context accurately reflects the genuine challenges faced by rape victims, carers, and the vulnerability engendered by an individual’s assertion of authority following an assault. The protagonist’s resiliency is unusual in real life but the reality of power as a catalyst for sexual assaults and other types of violence is effectively conveyed in the novel. Numerous instances in Indian culture demonstrate that social convention measures an individual’s worth especially when power is involved. The majority of rapes are occurred by the person in power, in the novel’s case Vikram Singh’s hegemonic masculinity is fuelled with power driven by his social status. His Masculinity is heavily fuelled additionally with this inclination of political power. The narrative transcends a mere tale of retribution or exploitation.

The author uses Radha’s struggles to highlight bigger issues in Indian society such as the unequal gender normativity, the influence of Political wealth and socially assertive class to escape from the rape crime. Radha being the victim of male power abuse, should have got justice effortlessly, as the crime of rape is fundamentally wrong on all levels. Brownmiller’s arguments on the subject of rape in her work *Against Her Will* published towards the end of the last century interact with the events of the novel. Even though the work is of highly American, she has documented multiple facets of this heinous crime which also includes various rape situations created by traditional gender norms.

Rape culture also involves drug abuse, where the distended senses motivate the perpetrators to assert their strength on women who startle their masculinity. According to Baltieri and de Andrade, Drug and Alcohol consumption is a major issue for sexual offenders against women, and males who belong to fraternities are more likely to commit rape than non-members (75). Right from the initial encounter with

Radha, Vikram Singh is highly intoxicated. When he teases Radha at the carnival, he is moderately intoxicated. When he abducted her, he had turned into an absolute master due to severe alcohol intoxication. One can think that, if he were not drunk, he would behave himself with Radha. But in truth, Alcohol is an additional factor that influences perverse minds. Post-rape, Radha is put in a Brothel, where Alcohol is frequently consumed there as well.

In rural societies where women are typically seen as weak and helpless, rape is either a kind of punishment or a way for males to show their strong masculinity over women who are seen as inferior in certain social classes. All the women characters in the temple bar are the victims of abuse, even the administrator of the Brothel temple bar is a victim of abduction and later sold to a brothel for prostitution. Habiba Bi, even though portrayed as a fiendish character for forcing women into prostitution in the novel, her past reveals and defends her current abysmal tone. “When Habiba was merely nineteen years of age, her uncle kidnapped her from the village. After being raped and ill-treated by him for months, she was sold to the temple bar for few thousand. She knew she could never return home even if she somehow managed to escape from the brothel and there was no other place to go to. With her grit and uncanny business instinct, she managed to build an empire out of the same dirt she was thrown into.” (Parashar 33)

When men feel inadequate, they are more likely to accept cultural messages of male superiority and the use of power and dominance over women. Scully and Marolla in *Convicted rapists' Vocabulary of motive: Excuses and justification* describe that Rape serves a variety of purposes for men, such as retaliation and/or punishment against a single woman, women collectively, or retaliation against a man, an extra benefit in committing another crime, sexual access to women who are unwilling or unavailable, sexual conquest, the desire for impersonal sex, the fulfilment of a rape fantasy, recreation or adventure, the pursuit of a challenge, power, control, and dominance, feeling good, demonstrating camaraderie with other men and proving masculinity (Scully and Morolla 537)

As Brownmiller demonstrates the event of rape through various cultural phenomena, Scully and Morolla add concrete reasons to understand the men's hand in the purpose of rape. One could carefully read the text and examine these inklings and see how these ideas are developed throughout the story. Radha is raped as she retaliated against a Man. Vikram is determined to punish Radha because sexual access to an unwilling woman gives him a sense of challenge, power, control, dominance and adventure. He performed a gang rape also to prove the camaraderie. A perpetrator establishes his masculinity by raping a woman. Vikram is exactly that type, he needs to follow his perverse mind to establish fragile masculinity. Habiba is a victim of incestuous sexual conquest by her uncle. Though her portion of the past is limited in the novel, her character shows much depth in the developing events in Radha's life. The sex workers in the novel despite voluntarily working in the temple bar, are also in a way victims of Men's sexual fantasy.

## Conclusion :

*The Temple Bar Woman* is a complex look at modern-day social problems around rape in India. From the discussion, it is evident that one's power consciousness and fragile masculinity are the two major reasons behind such crime. Radha is not only the victim of rape, she is the victim of power consciousness and fragile masculinity. It is a rape narrative but what makes it unconventional is that this rape victim found her way to come against all the hindrances that had been thrown upon her. The novel also touches on justice, identity, and social class themes during the victim's character development. Radha's story of getting revenge for being raped is dramatic, as she goes from working in a brothel to being a governess but the author pushes readers to rethink what they think they know about sex jobs, morals, and justice.

The second wave of the feminist movement posits that males perpetrate rape against women to reinforce their masculinity. Gender studies predominantly embrace the concept that gender and gender roles are socially produced rather than innate characteristics derived from biological demands. West and Zimmerman consider gender as “not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others” (West and Zimmerman 140). They also add that People are then held responsible for their gender performance according to the cultural setting and their sex categorisation. Gender transforms into a verb instead of a noun, representing an action rather than an inherent quality. The perpetrator in the novel, Vikram performs what he believes to be masculinity, thus

his gender has more to do with his actions propounded by the culture to which he is accustomed. From a woman's perspective, this type of rape is sudden and terrifying and the unexpectedness of the attack produces a tactical disadvantage, leaving them to live in a scar for one lifetime.

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