

Silenced Voices - Gendercide in the Guise of Honour: A Comparative Study of Elif Shafak's "*Honour*" and Perumal Murugan's "*Pyre*"

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Abstract—The oppression of women based on gender in a male dominated society dates back to the dawn of early civilization. Every day countless women are tormented and their plight, ill-treatment, exploitation and murder continue globally. Even in the century, despite productive strategies initiated by International Women's Right Movements over the years, women are still victimized, slaved, bullied, assaulted and burnt by perverted narcissists and by their own family members. The Delhi Nirbhaya brutal rape that shook the entire nation, drawing wide spread protest and anguish worldwide has tarnished the country's image globally. Even before the nation could shed the shock of the gruesome event, another tormenting episode of barbaric cruelty on women has taken place in Kolkata and the fire of anger over the assault is consuming the entire nation. Many incidents, in many forms, in many places and in many hues take us toward the single question; is the dignity of women is safe and safeguarded? Women are objectified, subjected to physical violence and burnt alive to honor the family pride, the list goes on. Since literature is a genuine reflection of life, it continuous to inform and educate the society about what shouldn't be happening, what is happening and what should ideally happen. The two great advocates of women's rights Elif Shafak and Perumal Murugan have always voiced their concerns over the treatment meted out to women in society. This paper is an effort to bring out the horrendous forms of gender violence in the name of honor through the prism of Elif Shafak 's Honor and Perumal Murugan's Pyre.

Index Terms—violence, gendercide, patriarchal, exploitation, discrimination

Gender discrimination and gender-based violence are prominent and prevalent issues which need to be addressed to institute an equitable social system. Gender inequality is a global issue prevailing

in many societies which either derails the graph of growth or neutralises the effects of growth already achieved. The common externalisations of inequality of this day can be bifurcated as restrictions on education for girls, discrimination against transgender people in healthcare systems and disparity of processing higher studies. Society has always placed restrictions on women, clipping their wings and preventing them from exploring the vast firmament of opportunities. In the road towards total emancipation and empowerment, there are many barricades that block the smooth traverse of the self-esteem of womanhood. In the present scenario, these blocks are personified in the forms of prenatal sex selection, female infanticide, female genital mutation, child marriage, honour killing, dowry deaths, and less pay for women. The need of the hour is to address these constraints on war footing to give a strong foothold to women which they deserve in society though the corner stone for the same had been laid by the feminist movements which started as early as in nineteenth century.

Honour killings represent one of the darkest facets of modern society, rooted deeply in patriarchal, casteist, and regressive beliefs. Defined as the murder of an individual, often a family member, for bringing perceived "shame" or dishonor to a family, this practice thrives in a paradoxical society that simultaneously reveres tradition and seeks to modernize. Honour killings are most often a reaction to perceived transgressions, including inter-caste marriages, inter-religious relationships, same-sex unions, or defiance of gender norms. Nowhere is this phenomenon more pervasive than in India, where the

intersection of caste, religion, and gender norms creates fertile ground for such atrocities.

The social structure is heavily influenced by its caste system, a centuries-old stratification that dictates social order, marriage alliances, and personal relationships. The caste system, though outlawed by the Indian Constitution in 1950, remains a defining force in rural and urban India. Inter-caste marriages, which challenge this rigid structure, are one of the most common triggers of honour killings. Families often perceive such unions as a direct challenge to their status and cultural identity. This perception is further intensified in rural areas, where collective societal pressure reinforces the family's responsibility to "protect" its honour by adhering to traditional practices, even if it means resorting to violence.

Honour killings are not limited to caste-related issues; they are also deeply tied to patriarchal values and control over women. In many parts of India, women are regarded as bearers of family honour, their conduct closely monitored to ensure compliance with societal expectations. Decisions regarding their education, marriage, and mobility are often made by male family members. When women assert their autonomy, whether by choosing their partners or pursuing personal aspirations, their families often view it as an affront to their authority. This loss of control is intolerable to many, leading to heinous acts of violence to reassert dominance and "restore" family honour.

Religion also plays a significant role in perpetuating honour killings in India. Inter-religious marriages, particularly between Hindus and Muslims, are viewed with suspicion and hostility by conservative groups. Such unions are often politicized, with narratives of "love jihad" – a groundless speculation theory suggesting that Muslim men sometimes marry Hindu women with the intention of converting them to Islam which fuelling communal tensions. Families, fearing ostracization or backlash from their religious communities, may resort to violence to prevent or punish such relationships.

In many cases, honour killings are not impulsive acts but premeditated crimes involving the collusion of multiple family members. These murders are often carried out with chilling precision, with victims being lured into traps or killed in public to send a message. The methods of execution – ranging from poisoning to burning and even public lynching – highlight the

brutality of such crimes. What is particularly alarming is the community's tacit approval or indifference in many cases, reflecting a deeply entrenched culture of impunity.

The Indian legal system has taken steps to address honour killings, but the implementation of laws remains a significant challenge. The Indian Penal Code does not have a separate provision specifically addressing honour killings, though such acts are prosecuted under existing laws pertaining to murder, abetment of suicide, or grievous hurt. In 2010, the Supreme Court of India described honour killings as a "rarest of rare" crime deserving the harshest punishment. However, systemic issues such as delayed investigations, witness intimidation, and societal pressures often hinder the delivery of justice.

One of the landmark legal initiatives to combat honour killings is the 2011 Supreme Court judgment declaring khap panchayats – traditional caste councils – unconstitutional when they promote or endorse such killings. Khap panchayats are notorious for issuing diktats against inter-caste or inter-religious marriages and have been directly or indirectly linked to numerous honour killings in northern India, particularly in states like Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. Despite the ruling, these councils continue to wield significant influence, often acting as parallel judicial bodies in rural areas.

Civil society has played a crucial role in bringing attention to honour killings and advocating for victims' rights. NGOs, women's rights groups, and human rights activists have consistently highlighted the prevalence of such crimes and the need for legal reforms. Campaigns to promote inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, raise awareness about individual rights, and provide support to victims and survivors have gained momentum in recent years. However, these efforts face strong resistance from conservative factions and often place activists themselves at risk.

Media coverage has been instrumental in exposing the brutality of honour killings, but it also reveals society's contradictory stance. While sensationalized stories of violence garner widespread outrage, they are often accompanied by debates about cultural traditions, morality, and family values. This dichotomy underscores the urgent need for a shift in societal attitudes. Education and awareness campaigns must be prioritized to challenge regressive mindsets

and build a community where everyone feels valued and respected.

Education plays a vital role in combating honour killings. Comprehensive sex education, discussions on gender equality, and the promotion of critical thinking from an early age can help dismantle the deeply ingrained biases that perpetuate such crimes. Schools and colleges must actively encourage inter-caste and inter-religious dialogue, fostering an environment where diversity is celebrated rather than feared. Additionally, vocational training and economic empowerment programs for women can enhance their autonomy and reduce their dependence on patriarchal family structures.

Conservatives vehemently prioritize the preservation of caste and community, along with their associated rituals. However, they often overlook the importance of ensuring these practices, infringing upon the human rights of individuals denting the democratic framework rightful for each citizen. A dark side of arranged marriages and endogamy is the violent killing of couples who defy societal norms by choosing partners from different communities.

By common consent, literary works, of any nature, are reflections of societal life. They have always played a considerable role in mirroring and mending society by replicating the different dimensions and dilemmas of social life. Literary works are ideally characterised as agents of reformation with their portrayal of the progress and plight of the different sections of society. In this connection, one of the dominating themes of literature, all over the world, is its indulgence in women centric issues. The global literature repertoire delineates a graph of constant rise in its portrayal of the field of femininity. Irrespective of geographical denominations, writers of all times, have dealt with the problems and prospects of womanhood. This phenomenon dates back to the beginning of civilisation and has travelled this far, impregnating its radius, with the ever-increasing travails faced by women. Many writers have deliberated upon the place of women in society, with special focus on her place in married life. Those societies are still treating women as an inferior sex and for the sake of their honor, they are ready to kill her, torture her and dishonor her. Not only female writers but male writers also showed their support through novels, poems, articles etc.

Elif shafak of Turkey and Perumal Murugan of India have an invincible position as the mouthpieces of the

distressed damsels. Honor by Elif Shafak and Pyre by Perumal Murugan portray the sufferings of women, inflicted by the vicious and vile practice of honour killing.

Elif Shafak and Perumal Murugan are two contemporary authors with courage to delve into the complex human problems in their respective works. Elif Shafak, a Turkish- British novelist, has published twenty one books in which five books are short listed for the Costa Award, British book awards, RSL Ondaatje prize and women's prize for fiction. Perumal Murugan is one of the most acclaimed Tamil writers hailed from rural India. He has written eleven novels in which of his five novels have been translated into English. He has authored collection of short stories and poems. His works are shortlisted for International Booker Prize. Both are the much celebrated author's in this era. As the dutiful novelists, they have strongly given voice to the existing problems like immigration, exploitation, displacement, crime against women, domestic violence, economic and political inequality, discrimination on the basis of caste, class, and religion, psychological trauma, etc., Both the authors had to encounter backlash and criticism for their critical scrutiny of the social parameters of society.

There is a dire need to stop murdering girls and women in the name of 'family Honour'. Honour killings occur within communities as a punishment for perceived violations of social, sexual, religious, or family norms. These acts are frequently perpetrated by family members against women accused of dishonoring their family. Women are taught from childhood to protect the name and fame of family. Religion and caste act as mighty forces in gender discrimination to oppress, to liberate, to comfort or to kill.

The novel Honor by Elif Shafak deals with the story of three generations of Turkish, Kurdish Toprak's family. The story begins with Esmâ waiting to pick up her elder brother Iskander who committed the murder of his mother to protect the honor of his family. The flashback introduces the identical twins Pembe and Jamila. While Jamila chooses to be a virgin, Pembe marries Adam. Pembe gave birth to Iskander followed by Esmâ and Yunus. The family moves to London settling for livelihood. Adem deserts Pembe for another girl. Simultaneously Pembe is drawn towards Elias which Iskander could not accept. He considered his mother's relationship with Elias as a disgrace to the

honor of the family. Instigated by the trigger of people around him, Iskander kills his own mother to safeguard his family's honor.

The novel 'Pyre' deals with the theme of honor killing set in Kattupatti a remote village in Tamilnadu. The story chronicles the life of the couple, Kumaresan and Saroja, belonging to two different castes, who loved, eloped and married secretly. They come to Kumaresan's village with the hope of getting settled. Kumaresan's mother disapproves their marriage and insults them as they have brought disgrace to their family honor. The entire village is against them and ostracizes the couple.

As the isolation grows, the couple moves to an adjacent village. Trailing them, Kumaresan's family finds out their whereabouts. One day when Kumaresan went to search for a job, his mother and family members set fire in bushes where Saroja went to defecate. As she is trapped in bushes, engulfed by flames, Saroja listens to the cycle bell sound of Kumaresan who was approaching the village. The novel has an open ending where the readers can assume and associate the cycle bell sound as a harbinger of an impending change and Kumaresan as a representative of the revolutionaries whose approach also is imminent to eradicate the caste system.

The book highlights the struggle of inter-caste couple, honor killing, casteism and how it is difficult, especially for women, to survive such marriage. From a gendered lens, the book covers the story of the struggle of protagonist Saroja since the beginning of her marriage. She had been called names, slapped and taunted everyday yet she chooses to stay silent.

The book also captures the internalized misogyny of women when it comes to maintain the existing social circle. Saroja had been called slurs on a daily basis, with the villagers asking her what she did to attract Kumaresan, with the unanimity of the village answer being, "she must have cast a spell on him". This attitude of the village community of men, being inexorable, labels women as witches and seductress.

Kumaresan also is portrayed as a subdued character. His silent acceptance of the filthy remarks given by the villagers about his wife and his instructions to Saroja not to react, bear testimony of his waddling character. He also has informed saroja about his life before marriage where he lived how the situation can get and what might be the condition that saroja might face after marriage. saroja character has been seen as a

obedient, helpless women who followed her husband just to stay safe as she knew mostly about the new place. She could not even express her problems with her husband as she thinks he is already stressed. She prioritizes him over herself and she stays calm. And ignores the request her for taking her back to her own village when she gets suffocated and faced the insults and behaviour of the people around her.

The analysis of the topic of women empowerment necessitates the dissection of a number of parameters of society with reference to the opportunities given to women and measuring the same against the yardsticks of the ideal scenario and the real situation. Tracing the journey of women from the confines of the four walls of seclusion to the serene fields of success, had always been a tumultuous one, dotted with debacles and dejections. Yet, with grit and determination, each step was taken forward, dreaming of a world which heartily welcomes women to equal opportunities and openings, though the same remains a Utopian dream till date. Robert Frost says in 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening', "Miles to go before I sleep and, miles to go before I sleep". Though the progress and inroads made, not to be belittled, it is not certain when the journey will reach the final destination of equality and equal parity.

What is really alarming is that in an age which is glorified for its sophistication and suaveness, the number of cases of honour killing, explicitly manifests a graph of steady rise. The prevailing scenario, where the escalating cases of honor killing dominate the front pages of newspapers, negates the notion that humanity has progressed from the natal stage of uncivilization to the noble stage of civilization. Of course, there had been a time when caste, colour and creed determined the treatment meted out to human beings. It was with dare devil struggles and sacrifices that emancipation has been obtained. But is this emancipation, which is the fruit of the bloodshed of the selfless souls, going astray and meaningless now, with barbarity has taken the garb of honour killing? If emancipation had been in true sense and if civilization has achieved real progress, how do the cases of honour killing based on caste, peep out its head now and perpetrate its devastating shadows. The need of the hour is to have a thread bare introspection of where and why this slip has occurred. If in this touted to be the age of refined civilization, humanity falls into the ditch of barbaric era, reformation and rebuilding have to be started from

the scratch. A scenario of this ilk will make history repeat itself. Before it is late for action and before the situation exacerbates and that no action can save the situation, constructive measures have to be initiated to chain the demon of honour killing. A rebirth of campaign and revolutions to arrest the spread of the malicious practice of honour killing and exhortations to people to abstain from honor killing, will bring about the desired impact. People of the foregone era dreamed a society where equality and parity are the standards of social life and where the complete blurring of the margins of caste-based discriminations define the society. Though it can be stated that the journey towards the realisation of the dream of an ideal society is stationery now, it is on the shoulders of the current generation to either take it backward or forward. If the journey retreats, the destination will be a barbaric point and if the journey advances, the destination will be a beautiful point.

Though Saroja is not killed by society for violating the caste rules, the state of being alive is worse for her than being dead. The life of Saroja is an indictment of the indirect savagery of caste predicament. Honour killing doesn't have to be always in literal sense whereby the person is succumbed to death but can also be figurative of the inexplicable plight of women and their despicable living conditions.

Despite the grim reality, there are glimpses of hope in the form of changing attitudes among younger generations. Urbanization, increased access to education, and exposure to global cultures are gradually eroding the rigid boundaries of caste and religion. Social media platforms and online communities have also provided safe spaces for individuals to express themselves and challenge societal norms. Love Commandos, an organization that provides shelter and support to couples facing threats due to their relationships, is one such example of grassroots activism aimed at protecting individual rights.

The Indian government must take more proactive measures to combat honour killings. This includes enacting a specific law to address such crimes, strengthening witness protection programs, and ensuring timely investigations and prosecutions. Police personnel must receive sensitivity training to handle cases involving inter-caste or inter-religious relationships with fairness and empathy. The judiciary must also expedite cases of honour killings, sending a

strong message that such acts will not be tolerated in a modern democracy.

Honour killings are not merely a legal issue but a societal one that reflects the deep-seated inequalities and prejudices within Indian society. Eradicating this practice requires a multifaceted approach that addresses its root causes – casteism, patriarchy, and religious intolerance – while promoting a culture of inclusivity and respect for individual rights. The battle against honour killings is a battle for the soul of a nation striving to reconcile its traditional roots with the ideals of equality, liberty, and justice enshrined in its Constitution.

These novels serve as powerful reminders of the urgent need to challenge the cultural norms that perpetuate gendercide. They compel us to question our own complicity in these systems and to actively work towards a future where women's lives are valued and their voices are heard. "Honour" and "Pyre" are not just literary works; they are testaments to the resilience of the human spirit and calls to action against the silencing of women. They remind us that the awareness, fostering empathy, and inspiring change. By bearing witness to these silenced voices, we can begin to dismantle the structures that perpetuate such violence and work towards a world where honor is not synonymous with death, but with respect, equality, and justice for all.

In conclusion, honour killings are a grim reminder of the societal contradictions that persist in India. They expose the chasm between constitutional values and ground realities, between progress and regression. The fight against this practice is not just about saving lives but about transforming mindsets and dismantling the structures that enable such violence. While the road ahead is fraught with challenges, the collective efforts of individuals, organizations, and institutions can pave the way for a future where love and autonomy are celebrated, not punished.

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