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When rape culture weds religious dogma: questioning the dangerous holiness of virginity through *Vanyam*

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Abstract

Third wave feminism has always dealt with multiple dimensions of gender notions and pluralities of cultural and social practices regarding gender. Regressive ideologies when sugarcoated by the notion of 'purity' in religion catalyse rape culture and encourage patriarchy better than anything else. Nuns position themselves as humble servants of the ideological state apparatus called religion, in which patriarchy is the norm. The Malayalam word for nun is "kanyasthree" which means "virgin woman". Thus, a tribe of human beings being addressed by their sexual status exist in India. This paper titled "When rape culture weds religious dogma: questioning the dangerous holiness of virginity through *Vanyam*" probes into the intricacies of rape culture and the role of religious patriarchy in it through the Malayalam film *Vanyam* (2016) directed by Sohan Seenulal.

Keywords: rape-rape culture-patriarchy-nuns-religion-ideology-ideological state apparatus-virginity-holiness-chastity-human rights-sexuality-gender

"No one is more arrogant towards women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility" says Simon De Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex*. Manliness' final abode is the submissiveness of woman, the other. Rape, which is the end product of rape culture in a patriarchal society, is always nurtured by several Ideological State Apparatuses. Religion, as opposed to other ISAs, is based on values, principles and morals that reinforce the concept of purity. Purity, which is supposed to propagate peace and well-being, backs violence, as a result of internal contradictions of the notion of purity in a male dominated society.

In the Malayalam film *Vanyam*(2016), the lives of three sexually frustrated youths, viz. *Krishna*, *Riyaz* and *Vivek* are depicted. Their attempts to build up love affairs with the girls in the locality goes in vain and they try to engage with a woman sex worker. That also goes unfruitful when she charges more for her services. Completely desperate, they plan and decide to rape a nun. Here, the film tells that attempts for love affairs, sex with a sex worker and rape- the progression of

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their prospective sexual experiences- are more or less the same for them. They represent a society that marries only for sex and reproduction. The idea behind raping the nun (Sister *Anita*) is that being a nun, she won't 'try to "bring shame" to the church by telling about the incident to the world', says the rapists.

The assumption of the rapists turns mostly true when the church decides to keep the incident from the world outside. When Sister *Anita* realizes that she's pregnant after rape, she decides to keep the baby, as the religion has taught her that abortion is sinful. The religious authorities, including priests are of the opinion that the incident must be kept as a matter of secret. When they realized that Sister *Anita* decided to keep the baby, they expelled her. The nun's decision about abortion can be seen as a result of her religious education. This selfsame religion disowned her when she stood by their preaching. This throws light into the inherent hypocrisy of religious authority.

At one particular juncture in the narrative, the rapists become aware of the power of religious authorities and are threatened by the prospect of their possible future threats. Then they reassure themselves by saying "She won't tell anyone. After all, the loss is hers". The aftermath of the rape makes the rapists' assumption, that the nun is "safe to rape",

true. Sister *Anita*, who is the epitome of submissiveness and obedience, is reluctant to tell the names of those who raped her. The film hints that she doesn't forgive them, but is afraid of the aftereffects of her words if she revealed the truth. Yet she decides to abide by her moral values even at the risk of her position and life.

It is also thought provoking that a retired sex worker, *Susheela*, is the only person who was kind enough to give a shelter to Sister *Anita* after she's been expelled from the convent. The film tries to hint that both *Susheela* and Sister *Anita* are two sides of the same coin. One abstained from sex for religious reasons and the other used sex for a living. Yet both are equally victimized by an extremely patriarchal society. Their mutual empathy is symbolic of this strange connection. The attitude of the natives towards the nun after rape shows the hypocrisy of society-the people wanted to save the religion from dishonor but punish the nun for being no more a virgin woman (kanyasthree).

When one of the rapists (*Riyaz*) becomes guilty for his deed and asks the nun to marry him, she objects by saying "even I don't want you". Here she has a feeling of being less of a human after the attack. This feeling is shared by other nuns in the convent, but they tried to settle the issue by aborting the child, and when she objected they disowned and expelled her

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like waste. Here the religious authority considers that a nun's sexual status has more to do with the church's prestige than the action taken by them against a cruel deed like rape. Like every other system in a patriarchal society, religion also considers rape as a theft of purity, and not physical attack or torture.

There is a scene in the movie where a middle aged woman watches the nude images of the nun copied by one of the rapists online. The "male gaze" here acts through both genders and results in criminalizing the nun. The trauma inflicted upon the nun after the incident is skillfully presented by the director.

Thus, the film *Vanyam* depicts the dangerous truth that there are women who are "safe to rape" even now, in India. They can be children, nuns, aged women or anyone who is out of the safe zone- anyone who crosses the boundaries of societal customs and sometimes, those who are inside the boundaries also. The film is an eye-opener as well as a mirror of both the misogynistic social order and the hypocrisy in religion.

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