

Power Dynamics in Dysfunctional Marriages with reference to “*Open House*” by Elizabeth Berg and “*Black and Blue*” by Anna Quindlen

Ms. Richa Mehta ,Assistant Professor (English),A-22, Sadul Ganj, Bikaner 334001, Rajasthan.&**Research Scholar**, Mohanlal Sukhadia University, Udaipur 313001 Rajasthan (India)

Article Received: 09/11/2022,

Article Accepted: 11/12/2022,

Published Online: 13/12/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.12.04

Abstract

In the novels taken for study, *Open House* (2000) by Elizabeth Berg and *Black and Blue* (1998) by Anna Quindlen, this paper raises two issues, firstly, the different aspects of power, and secondly, how they affect the quality of their relationships. Power dynamics begins to exert itself in unhealthy relationships in the form of oppression as women have always been victims of marital discord, enduring pain and suffering. Coercive power subjugates the victim in various ways ranging from psychological to physical abuse. The ugliness of power play is intrinsic to dissolution of marital relationship as it is entrenched in patriarchy. This paper explores marital dysfunction based on patriarchy and power which addresses the problem of intimate partner violence against women. *The paper focuses on the power used against women and the violence they undergo emotionally, mentally and physically and bear all the bruises, not just in their bodies but deep down in their souls.* Many women go through this commonplace trauma of domestic violence and divorce, but it requires extraordinary and uncommon strength to look at life anew.

Keywords: power play, patriarchy, gender, dysfunctional marriage, survivor

Introduction

Civilized man says: I am Self, I am Master, all the rest is other-outside, below, underneath, subservient. I own, I use. I explore, I exploit, I control. What I do is what matters. What I want is what matter is for. I am that I am, and the rest is women and wilderness, to be used as I see fit (Le Guin, 1989). Man through innumerable generations has made sure that woman is subservient to him. He has always laid laws in favour of himself, subjugating her, treating her as his inferior, both in comprehension and command, a plaything to satisfy his carnal desires and nothing more.

The world lies wide open, full of endless opportunities, for a young man confronting life. He can strive to achieve whatever he chooses whether it is wealth, power, social distinction or fame. If he chooses wrongly at first, or he is ineffective or unsuccessful in one field, he may choose again, and yet again. When we look at a young woman confronting life with the same desires and ambition even her home and happiness, reputation, ease and pleasure, her bread and butter,—all must come to her through a small gold ring (Gilman, 1898).

The novels selected for study showcase their helplessness, their struggle for wanting to be treated as human, their tussle to set aside everything and move on, treading on a dynamite laden path that would explode at the slightest pretext if they tried to transgress the male protocol, a path strewn with traps to accuse them at every nook and corner whenever they tried to breathe free and venture alone, their tiny little victories after long drawn battles before they are finally able to be on their own.

Power dynamics are not as simple in intimate relationships because even in well-functioning relationships, both partners are inescapably dependent on each other. This mutual dependence constrains an individual's power. This can be very difficult for men who have sexist views because they are already concerned about losing power to women and they may lash out at their significant other in harmful ways. Endless battling for equality and defending against mistreatment is exhausting. And for women, it does not make for warm harmonious relationships (Cross, 2018).

Power dynamics stems from the need to be in control, rather than being controlled. Since time immemorial, man has been in control, sometimes subtly and sometimes overtly and even brutally with all shades of gray in between.

Open House

You stare at the man you love and you are staring at nothing: he is gone before he is gone (Berg, 4). Elizabeth Berg takes a deep plunge into the female psyche. Very honestly she portrays what a middle aged abandoned woman feels, “How wrenching it is when the question you want to ask is, Why don’t you want me? but you cannot ask it and you do not ask—or talk about—anything else (Berg, 17).” It is said that an unhappy marriage is worse than no marriage at all. Since times immemorial, marriage has been characterized as a lifelong relationship between spouses. But reality is far from this idealism.

David behaves indifferently insensitively and converses uninterestedly in insignificant monosyllables, deserts Samantha after twenty years of marriage for no valid reason. He thinks she’s satisfied with life whereas he wants more. Hence, he walks out of marriage leaving Sam and their eleven year old son Travis adrift. After the initial shock Sam tries to come to terms with her life. She opens her house for boarders to be able to pay for the house mortgage. Some nice and loving friends like Lydia, Rita and King help her restore her lost confidence and self esteem in their own ways. She goes out and does odd jobs to make a living. David, after the ill-fated dalliance reverts back, but Sam has found her ‘self’ and politely refuses his wish to come back. The novel focuses on the fact that sometimes a tragedy is a blessing in disguise and takes the victim to the place where they can find their true self and be happy.

It is conventionally believed that a woman needs to surrender her power to her man. Christine Rose and Gina Greco in their book, *The Good Wife’s Guide* (2009), express that a

wife needs to be selfless and over look all her husband's misdeeds, conceal her thoughts and intentions. But this is exactly what Sam has been doing. Samantha Morrow, the protagonist, is shocked when her husband arbitrarily decides to walkout of their marriage. Her 'sin' is that she is content being a home-maker. Why and how she is satisfied and in complete accordance with her station in life, not looking for something extra to make life more interesting, troubles David so much that it gradually drifts him away. But the change is so gradual that when the boredom sets in she fails to notice it.

He made soup for me. That was before. When did after start? I don't remember it starting. I only remember it having arrived....I can feel loneliness in me like circulation; as constant and as refutable. (Berg, 17)

The initial security and comfort are taken for granted but as time goes by, an entire range of controls begin to surface, the roles begin to get installed and the relationship, stalled. Sam is submissive and not in the capacity to negotiate, feels frustrated, resentful and emotionally disconnected. In her acceptance and passivity, he sees powerlessness, low self esteem and fearfulness which frustrate him. He is callous and unsympathetic with his passive-aggressive behaviour towards her. We find a complete lack of communication and understanding on his part. He treats his wife like a disposable commodity. Instead of discussing their relationship and making efforts to reinvent their marriage he conveniently shifts the blame on Sam and excuses himself. Neither of them thinks in terms of mutual good and caring. Without this symbiosis of energy and love, the power dynamics sets in.

Power sets the agenda for patriarchy. Bertrand Russell says power is the fundamental 'stuff' of human relationships in the way that energy is to physics (Qtd from *Patriarchy & Power*). He is the bread-winner, hence dictates. Once he wields power he acts selfishly and impulsively to the point that he ignores her interests and needs. The imbalance of power in this marriage is dissatisfying to both of them and deteriorates their relationship further. David, as the earner dictates major family decisions which leads to bitterness and ultimately results in the disintegration of their marriage.

Had she been more vocal, more confident, more fearless and financially independent, she'd be in a position to negotiate and participate in decision making and probably not land up in this uncertainty.

Her mother, too, a product of patriarchy, indifferent to her emotional disruption, coaxes her into blind-dates one after the other. She belongs to the age when it was thought impossible for a woman to survive without a man's support, she being just his shadow, he would provide for her financial and social security. Her mother only tries her best to put her in another barn. Lydia, the first boarder, on the other hand, is very understanding and supportive. Samantha's long standing friend, Rita, helps rebuild her shattered confidence. She helps her realize that the split is for her good and she need not suffer a woeful marriage. King, a docile young gentleman helps her find a job and is around whenever she needs support. Gradually, inch by inch, they help restore her self esteem.

And now with her exposure to the world outside, she comes to realize that she is more than a wife and a mother. As the self realization dawns, she begins to see things in a

perspective of an individual, a woman. With financial independence she gains confidence, which in turn empowers her to decide for herself fearlessly. She, politely but firmly refuses to get back together with David when he comes back disillusioned from his fling.

Black and Blue

The second novel, *Black and Blue* by Anna Quindlen, discusses power dynamics with a cry that is much louder and more intense.

In dominant-submissive relationships, the dominant person puts attention on the submissive person — and *holds* their attention on the submissive person, keeping them feeling slightly off-kilter, so they stay on their toes and completely focused on their own internal experience. This makes it very difficult for the submissive person to take independent action, because they are literally being held under the thumb of the dominant person's attention (Well, 2018).

And I wasn't even chained. I stayed because I thought things would get better, or at least not worse. I stayed because I wanted my son to have a father and I wanted a home. For a long time I stayed because I loved Bobby Benedetto, because no one had ever gotten to me the way he did. I think he knew that. He made me his accomplice in what he did, and I made Robert mine. I stayed because I thought things would get better (Quindlen, 8).

Surviving fractured bones in an abusive marriage for seventeen years, with her ten year old son, Robert, Fran Bendetto, a nurse by profession, is sick of her miserable life with a constant fear of an eccentric, police officer husband. Weary and washed-out of being beaten black and blue every other day escapes with the help of a social organization that relocates battered women, with a renamed identity, to a new locale in Florida to start a new life. But the fear still persists. In fact, it is more than ever now. It keeps the protective mother vigilant at all times of the father who had charred his soul. More than a year later the psychopath, traces them by a phone call made by Robert. After a nerve wrecking cruel tirade expressing his twisted desire to overpower her with his confused feelings of love for her, he knocks her unconscious. Soon after, he takes away Robert. She feels miserable and lost but there is a fond hope that he will come one day, when he is on his own with a sensibility unlike his father. Eloquent and evocative, it perfectly captures the complexities of abusive relationships, why women stay and why they leave (Sue, 2011).

Francis Benedetto, the protagonist, through first person narration tells a spellbinding story, a powerful and poignant account of a battered woman subject to spousal abuse who struggles to piece her life together. From the agonizing description of the torment she goes through, the character of her husband, Bobby, comes to life. A control freak of a husband, he suffers “the most severe pathology and the root of the most vicious destructiveness and inhumanity” as the social psychologist, Erich Fromm, defines Malignant Narcissism. All her life Fran waits to gauge Bobby's moods by his aggressive tone and his rough and domineering body language. And how huge was his rage. It was like a twister cloud; it rose suddenly from nothing into a moving thing that blew the roof off, black and strong (Quindlen, 116).

Bobby uses emotional blackmail and malevolence to ascertain his dominance. One violent abuse leads to another and sets the stage for chain reaction. Their relationship

degenerates into a situation where he plays with her like a cat chasing a squirming mouse. Terror becomes the most dominant emotion in their marriage. It is much safer to be feared than loved, because fear preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails, said Machiavelli in *The Prince* (1532). Fran is reduced to being a “reaction to Bobby’s actions, at least by the end. My clothes, my makeup: they were more or less his choice. I bought them, of course, but bought them with one eye always on Bobby’s face. And his hands (Quindlen, 116).

Men who showed more hostile sexist views felt they had less power in their relationships, were more aggressive towards their partners by being critical or unpleasant. They try to restore the perceived power imbalance through their aggressive behaviour (Cross, 2018).

Anna Quindlen navigates the undercurrents of domestic violence. Fran speaks about her mixed feelings for her husband – how he was two different people—and how it was possible to love and hate, desire and fear, loathe and long for the same person. Bobby very deceptively creates a feeling of doubt, dependency and shame in his wife. Sick of her miserable life of constant fear she sometimes wishes him dead. She conceals her secret from everyone, her mother, her sister, her friends, even her son. On the outside I looked fine: the job, the house, the kid, the husband, the smile. Nobody got to see the hitting, which was really the humiliation...(Quindlen, 116).

Quindlen throws down the gauntlet to families everywhere who rear women to be helpless doormats and condone the vicious conduct of men through their silence. The historical nature of gender-based violence confirms that it is not an unfortunate aberration but systematically entrenched in culture and society, reinforced and powered by patriarchy (Qtd from *Patriarchy & Power*).

Fran believes she can fix him if she can just give him what he needs. All she has to do is figure him out. And fix him. Or fix herself. Somewhere along the line the problem switches from him to you. It becomes easier to believe the problem lies at your own feet (Marsh, 2008). Bobby uses fear, guilt and shame to keep her under his thumb. Simone de Beauvoir says in *Second Sex*, Man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. In his explosive tirade he vents out his frustration. “You wanted to do what you wanted to do, go off with your sister, go off to the hospital, go off with your dyke girlfriends, just go off, go off, instead of being home, where you belonged (Quindlen, 116).”

She is a mother, and the wife of a man who wanted to suck the soul out of me and put it in his pocket. I’m not real good at doing things for myself. But for Robert? That was a different story (Quindlen, 116). Bobby, in his explosive outburst hits her so hard that he fractures her nose. Next morning when she sees fear in the eyes of her innocent little boy, Robert, she realizes it’s time to assert her power, gather courage and her inner strength and leave. With the help of Patty Bancroft, a social activist she flees with Robert to Florida with new identities. Though she is grateful to Patty, she also feels suffocated living by her instructions and hardly knowing anything about herself. She feels, “It was as though I existed in someone else’s imagination (Quindlen, 116).” Quindlen turns our attention on the Patty Bancrofts of the world who control women rather than empower them.

A year later, Bobby traces them by a phone call made by Robert, hits her unconscious and takes away Robert. The emotional and psychological consequence of domestic violence is severe. It destroys her self esteem, leads to anxiety, and makes her feel lonely and listless. The desperate mother buys an answering machine, in case Robert calls. He does, and all his conversation is recorded. She can hear the distress and pain in his recorded message. With the help of Mike, Robert's teacher and her friend, she visits a lawyer to no avail. Fran even goes to Brooklyn to look for him. Bobby has moved out to some unknown place with Robert.

Life goes on and with time, she marries Mike but retains her assumed name, Beth Crenshaw, the name which has empowered her and the one she feels one with. She believes in herself.

Conclusion

Neither Fran nor Sam is able to voice their feelings which make their relationship unequal and abrasive. The dominating husbands, work for their own agenda and act in a way that fulfils their needs not their wives'. Provoked by insecurity and inferiority the negative power struggle is never really won. We see two different patterns; David turns a blind eye and a deaf ear to Sam's emotions whereas Bobby controls even the air Fran breathes, both insensitive in their own acrimonious ways. Even if they both gratify themselves by being ruthless and domineering, the dynamics is unhealthy which results in their losing in the long run.

The light from within enlightens the souls and illuminates the lives of both the protagonists. Now they gain power over themselves. Theirs is a metamorphosis from frail and frightened women to fearless and strong individuals who overcome everything designed to destroy them. They reshape the power dynamics to make sure their voices are heard and heeded, not overlooked and ignored (Sandberg, 2011).

References:

Berg, Elizabeth. *Open House*. Penguin Random House, 2000.

Greco, Gina L., and Christine M. Rose, editors. *The Good Wife's Guide =: Le Menagier de Paris: A Medieval Household Book*. Cornell University Press, 2009.

Le Guin, Ursula K. Woman/Wilderness. *Dancing at the edge of the World*. Grove Press. p.v.1989

Luna, Kailin. 'Sexist Men Underestimate Their Power in Romantic Relationships'.

<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2018/11/sexist-men-relationship.html>

Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince*. 1532.

'Patriarchy & Power'. *Asian Pacific Institute on Gender Based Violence Website*, <https://www.api-gbv.org/about-gbv/our-analysis/patriarchy-power/>.

Quindlen, Anna. *Black and Blue*. Random House, 1998.

Sheryl Sandberg's Commencement Address Barnard College in New York City, New York, www.huffingtonpost.com. May 17, 2011

Sue, Mindy. Reading For Sanity Book Reviews. Well, Tara. A Dominatrix Reveals the Secret to Power Dynamics / *Psychology Today*.

Cross, Emily J. MS from the University of Auckland 2018. Emily completed her PhD in December 2018. Her primary areas of research focus on the intersection between social attitudes and functioning within close, intimate relationships.

Erich Fromm: March 23, 1900 – March 18, 1980) was a German social psychologist, psychoanalyst, sociologist, humanistic philosopher, and democratic socialist. He was a German Jew who fled the Nazi regime and settled in the US. He was one of the founders of The William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis and Psychology in New York City and was associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory.