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Gender Precarity and Covid-19 Lockdown: A Study on the Malayalam Movie *Wolf*

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic and the stringent lockdown that ensued exacerbated the precarity and vulnerability of marginalised sections in India. Confinement and social isolation amplified the pre-existing gender inequalities and structural violence endured by women. Women experienced systematic oppression in the hegemonic male-dominated power system. According to Gledhill (1987), women are frequently positioned within the pandemic narratives as either sexualised bodies that give hope or victims to be saved, which increases their precarity in times of crisis. This study examines the Malayalam lockdown movie Wolf (2021) as a case study of gender precarity, vulnerability and toxic masculinity among upper-middle-class women during the pandemic lockdown in India. It argues that the vulnerability of women in homes has exacerbated in Indian society during the Covid-19 lockdown through violence, either physical or verbal, due to the pre-existing gender precarity. It examines how the narrative structure exhibits a pattern of toxic masculinity where it depicts the patriarchal system as problematic but ultimately reverts to the antiquated notion of feminine weakness and protective manhood. It explores how the narrative representation of the pandemic reinforces and reflects existing societal gender norms and traditional binary stereotypes.

Keywords: covid-19 pandemic, lockdown narratives, gender precarity, vulnerability

Introduction

The declaration of a nationwide lockdown by the Indian government on 24th March 2020, which extended to four phases, restricted people from stepping out of their homes unless to buy essential resources. The lockdown forced home quarantine and exacerbated the domestic violence situation in India (Sharma and Khokhar). Women stuck with their abusive partners found it difficult to seek aid and support from others. The National Commission for Women (NCW) observed that the number of weekly domestic violence cases doubled during the lockdown in India (The Telegraph Online, 2020). The pandemic and lockdown were followed by the redefinition of "masculine subjectivities in terms of exalting violence as a mechanism of identity affirmation and empowerment" (Guzmán 290).

This study analyses the pandemic lockdown from the gender perspective, examining the experiences of precarity and vulnerability. The narrative structure and narrative representation of gender in lockdown narratives in India are analysed through the case study of the Malayalam lockdown movie *Wolf* (2021). Wolf by Shaji Azeez is an adaptation of G. R. Indugopan's short story Chennaya. The movie revolves around the female protagonist Asha, her fiancé Sanjay and her lover Joe, who are stuck at her house due to the lockdown.

Precarity, for Butler, is "a more specifically political notion" (Butler 3), where it is the

"differential distribution of precariousness" where "certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (26). Precarity is directly linked to gender norms (Butler ii). According to Butler (1993), gender norms are pre-determined. She argues that a woman who is raised in a repressive culture experiences free agency only because she is unaware of the norms and restrictions governing her life. For her, performativity does not provide a platform for the (re)making of an independent gendered identity (Joy et al.). Butler states, 'If what I want is only produced in relation to what is wanted from me, then the idea of "my own" desire turns out to be something of a misnomer. I am in my desire, negotiating what has been wanted of me.' (Butler xi). She further argues, 'The performativity of gender has everything to do with who counts as a life, who can be…understood as a living being, and who lives, or tries to live, on the far side of established modes of intelligibility.' (iv). When gender is performed in unexpected manners and transgresses the social norms, power reproduce itself, providing the possibility to unleash unexpected effects (Joy et al.).

Gendered Precarity in *Wolf*

Gendered precarity was much more visible among the upper and upper-middle-class households during the pandemic lockdown. Although they are at a higher social position within the Indian hierarchical class system, they were severely impacted by patriarchal norms. In a nation where social and cultural structures dominated by men have largely normalised women's subjugation, upper- and middle-class women were increasingly vulnerable to physical and psychological abuse at the hands of their hegemonic masculine spouses while trapped in the domestic space. The pandemic and the lockdown that followed have made it abundantly evident that domestic violence is a vicious cycle that affects women of all castes and social classes and is a potent instrument employed by patriarchal forces to marginalise and disempower them (Chakraborthy). The female protagonist Asha in Wolf belongs to an upper-middle-class Hindu family. She is stuck at her house with two men, Sanjay and Joe, due to the lockdown, about whom she has partial acquaintance. She is unable to reach out for help from both her mother and the police officers outside because of the life threat from Joe. She is relegated to a vulnerable position where she is dominated and abused by a man.

Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble* (1990), explains that "gender proves to be performance — that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (25). Narratives that depict determined and strong-willed women reverting to submissiveness reflect the conformity to heteronormative gender roles in society. Female characters from a male perspective perpetuate one-dimensional representation of femininity (Rane 256). The representation of the female character Asha in Wolf is problematic. Initially she is portrayed as an independent and assertive woman but ultimately becomes a passive and subordinate one. For instance, initially Asha questions the rude behaviour of Sanjay, to which he raises his voice against her. She asks for respectful behaviour and equality in the relationship. She questions, "Do you think talking rudely makes you more of a man?" (*Wolf* 31:06-31:12), to which he rudely behaves with her. But in the second part, after the entry of the third character named Joe, with whom Asha was planning to elope, her character arc changes from being a woman with agency to a submissive one. She pinpoints that she chose Joe and decided to go with him due to the mental trauma caused by Sanjay on her. She is portrayed as a naïve and immature girl who cannot take proper decisions about her life without the help of a man. First, she seeks the help of Joe and later, when she explores his violent nature, she goes back to Sanjay. Sanjay takes up the role of a protector who is willing to fight until he succumbs for her. It reinforces traditional relationship dynamics where the man is positioned as the protector or authority figure, while the woman is cast in a dependent or secondary role.

Narrative Structure

The narrative of *Wolf* intends to expose the toxic masculine traits that are normalised in relationships. Toxic masculinity here is "a loosely interrelated

collection of norms, beliefs, and behaviours associated with masculinity, which are harmful to women, men, children, and society" (Sculos 3). The narrative questions how Sanjay thinks marriage can be used as a means to control his fiancée, Asha. For instance, when Asha openly says, "Don't call me Edi or Nee", Sanjay whispers, "They (parents) have pampered her since she's the only child. Let the wedding be over" (14:47-15:15); he will mend her according to his wishes. Later, Asha questions how their wedding would be the biggest privilege society would provide to Sanjay that normalises his toxic masculine behaviour as it is between the husband and the wife. The 'outsider' of the narrative named Joe, along with Asha, exposes the misogynistic attitudes, weaknesses and narrow-mindedness of Sanjay only to go back to him for protection. He even uses violence against Asha and Joe when Asha chooses to live her life with Joe. Towards the end of the narrative, Asha discovers that Joe is a criminal with violent traits, exposing a different level of toxic masculinity and male ego. He turns into a wild animal who is ready to kill Asha and Sanjay. After the physical and mental torture, Sanjay was ready to change his misogynistic attitude. It portrays that men can be changed only through violence and threats. She is stuck between two men with different male egos and toxic masculinities because of the lockdown and is forced to choose Sanjay over Joe for her survival.

The narrative begins with an intention to expose the patriarchal attitudes of men in relationships and how it affects women's agency in their personal choices. In Wolf, the characters of Joe and Asha criticise and expose the toxic masculine traits of Sanjay, explaining why she cannot marry him and displaying how a woman who is surviving with him is under threat. For instance, Asha asks, "Why do you get angry with someone for no reason? That too a lady.", he replies, "I don't distinguish between genders. If it's a lady, she will bear it" (27:41-27:50), which reflects his misogynist attitude. Joe highlights why Sanjay cannot leave Asha after her rejection. It's not because of his love towards her but due to his false pride. Sanjay criticises Asha's choice to be immature and wrong and finds Joe to be a man of deceit. At last, all his assumptions seemed to be true and she was reduced from an independent, bold woman to an immature, submissive one. They exposed the patriarchal attitudes of Sanjay only to prove him right. Wolf employs a stereotypical patriarchal framework to criticise it. At the end, Joe turns from a wild animal to a good-hearted man who is ready to leave Asha without any strong reasons with Sanjay because, until then, he was planning to take her to South Africa by any means or to kill her after Sanjay leaves. Women in such narratives who exhibit strength are reduced to powerlessness within the heteronormative structure. The female protagonist in Wolf often occupies spaces where her vulnerability is either exploited or exacerbated by the controlling forces of male characters and the lockdown due to the pandemic, reinforcing her social precarity. This propogates the narrative of women being naturally vulnerable, which requires male protection and care. The abusers employ controlling tactics and violence to delineate women to a subordinate position (Subramani and Rekha Borah).

The vulnerability of the characters in Wolf can be examined through the lens of gender. According to Fineman (2017), "the human condition is one of universal and continuous vulnerability" (134). This study argues that both male and female characters in the narrative experience vulnerability but in varying form and degree, which is determined by their positions in the power structure of society. The vulnerability of the male characters arises from the societal expectation of a man and their struggle to meet it. In Wolf, Sanjay becomes vulnerable when he tries to convince Asha that he is superior to Joe in order to be married. His experience of vulnerability arises from his masculine ego and in comparison with another man of strength. Joe's lonely existence in South Africa is his vulnerability. While Asha experiences vulnerability because of her gender identity and the social constraints and pressures exerted on her, which are aggravated because of the Covid-19 lockdown. She is forced to choose between Sanjay and Joe for her existence and is unable to employ her vulnerability as resistance against the oppressive powers.

Conclusion

The Malayalam movie *Wolf* follows a narrative pattern of toxic masculinity where it tries to criticise

the system of patriarchy in family and relationships and how it exacerbates inequalities and abuse during the pandemic lockdown but ends in the interpellation of characters in the structures of the system. The pre-existing gender precarity in Indian society aggravated the vulnerability of women in homes during the Covid-19 lockdown through violence. The narrative represents the female protagonist as submissive and as a damsel in distress in need of the help of a chivalrous man. The pandemic, along with the lockdown, reinforces and reflects existing societal gender norms and traditional binary stereotypes. The narrative therefore "attempt a shallow probing into a womanhood that is supposedly liberated from the confines of patriarchy, but fail to rise above patriarchal norms and values; they end up using the same tactics and measures of female worth." (Gopinath and Raj 73).

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