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Commentary

Symbolic Violence, (Wo) men and Everyday Domestic Life

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Violence within the domestic sphere is not a new subject of study in the context of Indian society. The legal provision also corroborates the fact that there are offenders who commit violence within domesticity is now recognised. But women and men go through symbolic violence in everyday life within the domestic sphere almost regularly. Symbolic violence, which is subtle and veiled, does not appear to be aggressive, but it actually hurts. Such sufferings are often not acknowledged or minimized in everyday social interactions. Taking from Pierre Bourdieu and Slavoj Zizek, this article shall look into gendered domestic life and how women's and men's upbringing and socialization create ruptures of violence in mass media, which also resonates violence within the domestic sphere. The construction of violence is thus understated, delicate, and requires understanding to recognize and minimize it. The paper presents examples from real life and illustrates how symbolic violence operates within the domestic sphere.

Keywords: symbolic violence, gender and symbolic violence, domestic violence and symbolic violence, domesticity and symbolic violence.

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It was a rainy evening in North Kolkata. An old-fashioned home of a school friend was the place we had met after many years. Speaking about yesteryears, about friends, family, and near ones whom we both knew, my friend started to talk about his younger sister, who was married off in the years we had not met. She was married some years back by her parents. Now, she is still facing problems at her new home. Her parents have clearly stated that she will not be welcomed at her natal home if she decides to leave her husband and his family. Speaking about the day of her marriage, my friend described the rituals and how painstakingly the parents had arranged for her marriage. A second day to her marriage, called the bashi biye (a stale marriage day! it is generally celebrated by Bengalis from East Bengal and is the second and important day of the marriage rituals), is the usual day when the girl is ceremonially given to the groom, though the kanyadan (giving off the girl) has been performed on an earlier day by the father (guardian). It is on the second day of a marriage that the girl is put vermillion on her forehead by the new husband, and she completely becomes a member of the family of procreation. My friend said as she was pronounced the wife of the new groom, her new surname struck him so loud and hard that it seemed unbelievable to him. It was a habit of knowing the girl, identifying her as someone, that changed suddenly. She was to be known to all by now by a different surname altogether. The gathering cheered for the new name the bride received. It was not the opposite, i.e., the groom's name did not change. My friend muttered that if a completely new surname was granted to both but not, it was the woman who had to change not only her wishes but also her identity under pressure to perform a 'good' daughter, girl, or wife. It was called tradition, custom, and therefore necessary and unquestionable.

The girl's changed look after marriage had haunted him for a while. The sindoor (vermillion) spread over her forehead till the back of her head, and her hands were now full. She had worn a shankha (conch shell made bangle) and pola (a bangle made of coral) on both hands with a noya (a bangle made out of iron) on her left wrist as a mark of her marriage, for the well-being of her husband. All these are symbolic. The

groom had only worn a red thread on his right wrist as a mark of his marriage. He was supposed to wear this for eight days after marriage, while the girl had to wear this for her lifetime, only to be discarded if her husband died.

The example of the conversation stated above depicted too many things. One is space, the other is habitas. The girl had to adjust herself in a different space, far away from her natal home (exogamous marriage), under the glare of people she had not known (gotra exogamy) in her life (usually an arranged marriage by parents and relatives) so far. She was uprooted from her home, her relatives, and her cultural, social, and economic space, pushing her to a new form of domesticity where she is supposed to utilize her earned social capital (virtues of looking after and managing the household responsibilities) for the benefit of her new home. If she failed, it was her fault; if she succeeded, it was for her in-laws, who were cooperative and welcoming, and also for her husband, who cared but was never under any pressure to perform. So, any deviation from the standard meant negative sanction for the girl, not only from the members of her new family but also from her natal home. She was clearly told she would not be welcomed. It was not her home any longer. She may come, but for a vacation. She may not find her room as hers any longer; her belongings shall vanish, and anything she held dear to her heart may not be found in her vicinity any longer. Her natal life shall not exist for her.

Some processes, some strategies, some symbolic interaction, attitudes, and behaviour are structured that we practice every day. These practices become our habit, our custom that becomes refined day by day and helps to sustain inequality. At the same time, in deciphering personal relationships, too, these practices and strategies take an important role. Pierre Bourdieu has called this strategising principle ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu, 1990, 2000, and 2002). The main argument of this article centres on the concept of ‘symbolic violence’. The reason for this is that violence sustained as practice against women is placed within domesticity. Therefore, the deceptive and unseen character of ‘symbolic violence’ initiates a pattern of domination over women. This violence is most often unuttered, unrecognized, and

unknown. The concept of 'habitus' as developed by Bourdieu helps us to understand the concept of 'gendered violence' rooted in social structure (Bourdieu, 1977). It facilitates to construct a practical way that could render a clear understanding and challenge the operation of structures that are not apparently visible. The experiences of such violence by women are not restricted to any particular form. Many times, we see such violence crystallize to form a whole where it is difficult to discern which form was inflicted upon women. We come to know of such violence through women's narratives that suggest that these forms of violence are inflicted on them every day, in daily interactions, and are considered a natural progression necessary for adjustments to a new home. Therefore, it is not adequate to understand domestic violence only as violence that is factual, seen, and can be reported. Feminist research shows evidences of feminist resistance has addressed gender based violence and depicted how it is practiced and how we comprehend it. They suggest that there is a gap between the way we comprehend the symbolic violence and construct rationality for it. A feminist lens, therefore, helps to bridge the gap to understand symbolic violence. The example above has shown that symbolic violence is not limited to the family of procreation. It is also an important feature of the natal life. It is through anticipatory socialization that women are inducted into a 'choiceless' situation of dos and don'ts. In anticipation of a future household to be filled with happiness and peace, the natal family initiates certain domination, subtle and invisible, where the girl is forced to comply to prove that she is growing up to be a 'good' girl. The space that she could call her own, where she dreamt, where she experienced her childhood and her puberty is not to be 'hers' forever. She is initiated into a kind of forced detachment and a longing for a space that she could call hers, and for which she makes every effort not only after marriage, but is initiated into the process much earlier. This symbolic violence is based on domesticity but is not recognized under the legal definition of domestic violence. This is precisely why women suffer but cannot prove and succumb to such violent measures that curb their choices, freedom of choice, and therefore cannot dismantle the huge edifice of expectation from others.

Conventional theorising in sociology analysed social cohesion and conflict, but paid much less attention to the specificities of violence at interpersonal level, violence within the domestic sphere, or violence within partners in intimate relationships (McKie, 2006; Ray, 2000: 145; Ray 2011).The canon of mainstream sociology came to the conclusion that violence is a resolute feature of social life, excluding a few cases. The statement probably overstates the case in terms of violence generally as a central concern that sociology largely ignores, but is much more reasonable when we see it as relative neglect of the idea of domestic violence (s) in intimate relationships between partners. With Weber as an exception the classical sociologists, were generally not in consensus with stating interpersonal violence against both men and women. Durkheim and other classical sociological theorists, including Marx, paid much attention to either explain legitimate forms of social control, harmony and solidity or sources of dissection, elimination and disagreement (McKie, 2006). Like, as class domination was an overriding concern for Marx and Engels they accepted it in the origins of class oppression, domestic violence as an idea was not a major topic in their work. In the twentieth-century sociological traditions, grand theorists like Parsons, symbolic interactionists or the Frankfurt School theorists, have theorized violence, but generally had limited contribution to violence within domestic space. The focus mostly laid on institutional, collective and revolutionary violence rather on interpersonal violence.

The most powerful theorisation among contemporary sociologists who have analysed power and domination in an interpersonal context was Z. Bauman, U. Beck, P. Bourdieu, and A. Giddens (Outhwaite, 2009). In analysing the contributions of the above stated theorists, like Bourdieu (2001; see Chambers, 2005) has given a firm thought to men's violence against women and its structural causes. Following immense research on an international scene and resulting activism, there has been comparative trivialization of the concept of domestic violence in sociology. Added to it, feminist sociologists and associated researchers have internationally proclaimed against domestic violence (Hagermann-White et al, 2008; Hanmer and Itzin, 2000;

Hanmer and Saunders, 1984; Skinner et al, 2005). Regarding the issue of domestic violence the writings of the feminists are diverse and are embryonic rapidly. Though there are major dissimilarities within recent feminist literature on gendered violence, it has all through pointed to the sexual nature of violence as 'men's domestic violence', including mental violence levelled against women within the sphere of domesticity. The women's movement on the other has addressed intersectionality and explained violence from gendered visions regarding various dimensions like race, class, nationality, sexuality, age, and disability for many years (Crenshaw, 1989).

Bourdieu articulates his ideas on symbolic violence by focusing on the relationships between culture, social structure, and action. Bourdieu states that all cultural symbols and practices, from creative preferences to elegant clothing, science, philosophy, and even language, embody interests and reinforce dissimilarities that are based in society. Therefore, to gain a broad perspective, it is necessary to understand that the presence of power among individuals, groups, and institutions is necessary. In this context, Bourdieu argues that there is no separate field of study for power; instead, it permeates all aspects of social life. Each society has its own internal logic and value system. In this context, the sociologically determining factor in any action is the strategy and rules of the game being played. Bourdieu argues that social structure is not a reality separate from people but is understood through the analysis of various aspects of their interactions (Bourdieu, 1984). According to Bourdieu, sociology aims to understand the social structure behind human activities, efforts, and judgments and to explain the reasons for events in the social world. Bourdieu's works present various arguments to read social structures from a different perspective (Grenfell, 2012). Language plays a pivotal role in symbolic violence within family life and domesticity.

Social interaction in everyday life, within domesticity, plays an important role and is a context in which power, inequality, domination, and differentiation are expressed. These differentiations inflict scars that do not heal and are often dumped as 'normal ways of living' or as mental abuse in recent times. Calling someone by a non-human

identity or specifying that a woman is less intelligent *(boka, kyabla)* and inefficient *(dhharosh,* lady's finger*)* is such mental abuse that is more incapacitating than physical abuse. Young boys have often experienced boxing of their ears when they faltered and heard that they were *gadhha* (donkey), *goru* (cow), or *chhagol* (goat). Girls were showered with the feminine versions of the above. After all, physical abuse can be noticed. It is comparatively easy to disguise psychological abuse as simply being in a state of depression by the abuser (or *matha kharap hoye gechchhe*, she has gone mad). This verbal abuse occurs as a normal way of parenting skills where elders shower these phrases in front of others. If the man in the example above could be sensitive to his sister's change in life situation, it is quite imaginable for others to think about how the girl in question, and for that matter any girl, might go through. But no reports of such changes are abusive. The question is why?

First, because many women do not at first recognize that it is a form of abuse, because they are taught to think of it as 'normal', and therefore remain submissive to it. Second, women have recognized violence as an act whose effects can be visualized. Third, understanding of male behaviour and its different forms shades into one another. Fourth, we have an understanding of abuse settled analytically in a hierarchy rather than on the focus on various types of violence. As Liz Kelly (1988) argues, the continuum from a lesser to a higher form of abuse does imply that a straight line cannot be drawn between various life-incidents and forms of violence. Moreover, this understanding takes us beyond concentrating on acute forms of violence which are more common experience in the lives of women such as threats of violence, sexual harassment at work place, forceful sex with intimate partners and sexual assaults (Kelly, 1988: 78). Every little interaction in life can then act as a context of feelings of shock and revulsion, which may exaggerate under the condition of what is called 'normal and the organization of everyday life.' This can often make symbolic violence often remain unseen.

The everyday interactions display power dynamics and affect interpersonal relationships through acts, language, and communication. By way of keeping in control, policing through interactions is also an important way to rule. Understanding the unseen nature of violence and its different forms helps us understand why and how violence against women continues. Therefore, in analysing the operation of such invisible violence Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic violence' helps us with a particularly constructive instrument for recognizing the elusive process (Thompson, 1984). It is enacted under the mask of 'an enchanted relationship' because if it is exposed, it may provoke a violent response from its victims (Thompson, 1984: 56). Such may be the power of the relationship between the abuser and the victim that 'symbolic violence' becomes more effective and an efficient mode of domination as it impersonates the true nature of the relationship. Bourdieu (2002) argues that 'symbolic violence' can only be performed by those who implement it and is tolerated by those in a form resulting in its recognition of the act as a legitimate process (Bourdieu, 2002: 140). The fear of deviating from the norm and the impending threat to perform the way the system wants comes in the form of safety advice to women. It not only subjects women to control but also, under the guise of common sense, creates an unspoken splitting up between women: the ones who comply with the advice and those who do not. So, the women feel fearful of, or are threatened by, any impending deviance. The performance of conformation necessitates an implicit and handy belief made possible through training that arises from preparation of the body (Bourdieu, 2000: 172). This includes convincing women they comply with the instruction. Stanko (1990) points out that the advice seems necessary to follow because the advice is more likely to increase the fear in women of failing. It is a defensive strategy that normalizes women's concerns and keeps the burden on the individual women's shoulders, blaming women for not taking precautions (179). Women are at the disposal of the social order that forces on them the norm to conform via symbolic domination (Bourdieu, 2000: 171).

In Bengal, it is a tradition to ask elders before leaving home. So, when a groom leaves his home for marriage, he takes his mother. The mother asks him the purpose of his journey, to which he replies that he is going out to bring a maid servant for the mother. The groom, with the permission from his mother, leaves the home to bring a maid for his mom. It is a myth popular in Bengal where Lord Ganesha, before leaving his home for marriage, came to say goodbye to his mother Parvati. He saw that his mom, a Goddess herself, was hurriedly finishing off her meal with all her ten hands (Parvati is a form of Durga who has ten hands and therefore is Dasabhuja). To his amazement, Ganesha asked the reason for it. She replied that as the wife of Ganesha, after reaching her in-laws' home, she shall not offer food to her mother-in-law, Parvati, who is speedily completing her meal. Both examples are of men who are taught to look at women from a different perspective. They are not considered equal, nor are they considered a member of the family. She is either a service provider or an enemy (stranger) in the household. She is not welcomed yet necessary. It is also customary to tell men from their early childhood how their future wife would be and how they should treat her to maintain the balance in the household. For example, the son is often told not to be a straino (hen pecked) or go under the (anchaal) sari pleats of his wife. He has to be a male, strong enough to make a decision like Ganesha, who did not marry to keep his mother Parvati happy. It seems that masculinity is important only if it is exercised before the wife. A patriarchal perspective sees men as rational and normal in contrast to women, who are seen as irrational (emotional) and deviant. Surprisingly, the academics have taken a long time to understand that masculinity is also socially constructed and to view men as gendered. The study of men through a gender lens and masculinity refers to the position of men in the gender order. The ideal of masculinity and manhood, which are emphasized in family life in India, reinforce manhood as the coveted standard of behaviour. Here, language plays an important role. A young boy, if effeminate in some ways, is subjected to physical and verbal abuse. Moreover, a standard image of a man, tall and sturdy, also evokes pressures on young boys who are not well-built and are short in height. These young boys are subjected to pressure to be men. For Whitehead and Barrett (2004)

masculinities are situated within a specific cultural and social location and are expressed through those behaviours, languages, and practices specific to a particular cultural location. Such 'violent' actions are commonly linked with men and as a result are culturally defined as not the 'other' (feminine) (Whitehead and Barrett, 2004). The culture that speaks of clear ideas and advocate equality between men and women also does not believe in binary opposite cultural traits and will hardly have a concept of masculinity in the sense it has in modern culture. In a global platform, almost all societies support a model of masculinity that is universal, dominant, and patriarchal that is accepted as a norm. Though the construction of the concept of masculinity has followed different courses (Connell and Connell, 2005), nowadays it is associated with a series of social rules widely generalised: avoiding femininity; limited expression of emotions; rushing for actions and achieving status; cutting offing intimacy from sex; performing violence, etc. Manhood, as an identity, is socially constructed essentially on a relational basis. That is, in relation to women men are considered aggressive, achievers and are always trapped within the opposite values attributed to the identity of womanhood. In this binary logic, the male value is always placed in anterior and holds a confident position, conferring a negative value to its female opposite: strong and weak, brave and cowardly, rational and emotional, social and natural, productive and reproductive, public-versus private, active versus passive, dominant versus passive, abuser and sufferer, etc. Masculinities in such cultures are considered conventional dominant cultural norms and adhere to physical aggression, reasserting and defending a manly position. Both men and women internalize and tacitly accept the limits imposed by the patriarchal system, contributing to their own subjugation. Symbolic violence implicates psychological suffering, humiliation, anxiety, shame, and guilt. By accepting these limits, individuals become agents in their own domination and help to reproduce the patriarchal social order. Masculinity is arguably concerned with both positive and negative qualities. The negative qualities are hardiness, violence, unnecessary risk-taking, and 'emotional illiteracy', alongside 'positive' attributes like potency, covetousness, determination, and bravery; and features of more debatable value like individuality, spiritedness, consistency, and a practical

orientation form the basis what is masculinity and how it is defined in society. These attributes come into play in many ways both in micro and macro level. It would be too naive, however, to suggest that such 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 1987) is the result of the acts of individual men. Rather, masculinity operates as an ideology of gender that decides both relationships between men and women and between men and other men.

In a feminist encounter with activism, Farah Naqvi (2010) shows how in spite of the existence of a broad legal framework criminalizing domestic violence – the Indian women's movement has changed direction toward a more understanding perspective. Since long legal battles often fail to give justice to victims (women) within an understanding period of time the non- government organisations providing legal direction and support to victims of domestic violence now suggest settlements outside the court. Thus, the movement has faced the impasse of choosing between long-term ethical struggles for "legal justice" versus immediate relief for victims. Feminists in India have initiated and organized movements against gender violence (Chakraboty, 2023). But, opposing against acute forms of sexual and gendered violence does not imply that more softer structural forms of violence were placed low in the hierarchy of priorities. To emphasize, this is not to undervalue overtly violent crimes; however, the discussion surrounding 'gendered violence' often results in movements against the everyday structures of control. There is evidence of a slow shift now taking place in terms of forms of mobilization and protest against not only visible violence but also structural obstructions to opportunities and pleasure (Phadke, Khan, and Ranade2011).The question that immediately comes to mind is how to understand the 'normalization' of such barriers.

As a rational conclusion to the discussion above it can be said that domination that stems from symbolic violence is where less direct force is applied. It is assumed that it occurs and is more a product of when those who are dominated stop questioning the order of things. When women dissuade from questioning existing power relations as they perceive the world and consider it as 'natural', 'a given', and thus

unchangeable, it makes things difficult. Yet, at the same time, individuals do not question their own role in the construction and reproduction of domination and subordination (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Symbolic violence over individuals often are a form of domination which is practiced as everyday social habits. Symbolic violence can occur through the ordinary processes and practices of everyday life. Both the parties, the dominated and the dominant, can share the same understandings of the world. It aggravates miserable feelings that are so difficult for its victims to point out, and yet it is an element of what makes their lives so critical. Women who feel being loved by their abusers initially fail to recognize these acts as acts of violence. It appears to us that they perceive their relationship as 'delightful', at least in the first place. Domesticity is also covered by mass media called television, and now on the internet space, in contemporary times, violence is neatly and routinely portrayed. Viewers experience a subjective understanding of violence. It is connected to symbolic violence because symbolic violence is an intentional type of violence that happens through language. While intentional or objective violence is seen in the backdrop of the 'normal' that helps in keeping the status quo, this, symbolic violence operates at another level where it is a form of expression and demonstration of the world of relationships of power and dominance, the production of which is under the control of the society (Zizek, 2008). Social media has given us a space for the duplication of all sorts of discourses: relationships from work, family, and friends that occupy different social and virtual spaces. The context of the visible and invisible audience collapses and creates hostility and aggressiveness in social networks. Domesticity, domestic violence, therefore, should be treated from a different perspective to understand how and what kind of symbolic violence permeates our daily life. Understanding of such invisible and visible violence is essential to perceive what and how we shall define domestic violence.

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