



# The Politics of Purity: Denial of Female Identity and Sexuality

**Dr. Meera Baby R**

Associate Professor

Department of English

Govt. Arts College

Thiruvananthapuram

E-mail: meera.baby.r@gmail.com

## Abstract

The female body has long been regarded as an object. On her is vengeance fulfilled and victory celebrated. However, the idea of female sexuality is still considered a taboo in most parts of the world resulting in a constant denial of female identity. The patriarchal society's definition of a woman comes with the tag of honour and modesty. Such hegemonic interpretation of the moral codes does not acknowledge women as being humans with sexual instincts and desires. Moreover the twin concepts of modesty and honour have also been engraved deeply into our collective psyche by centuries of patriarchal indoctrination. Instead of ensuring equality and equity among its members, most human societies take great pains to enforce these celebrated notions that result in the physical and psychological breakdown of the victim. Unfortunately, this happens in societies that have vehemently fought for and welcomed the progressive notions of equality, justice, feminism, and democracy. The paper offers a feminist reading of the glorified violence prescribed and promoted by the 'civilized' human societies in its mission to curb female sexuality and to ensure the permanence of the twin virtues of modesty and honour.

**Keywords:** identity, modesty, honour, female sexuality, patriarchy, feminism



Violence in no form can be condoned and yet, it mostly is. We rant and rave about terrorists, murderers, rapists, child molesters, and abusive husbands and in-laws so often and with such intense passion that we forget or tend to condone the violence inflicted by our loved ones who in many cases are far worse than all the rest put together. The wounds on the female body and mind gifted by ourselves, our families or ethnic communities in the name of long-cherished values are no less revolting. This is a direct by-product of the patriarchal suppression of the female identity.

The ‘othering’ of women and the objectification of the female body is not fresh news. It has existed for centuries and has vehemently been critiqued by the multiple waves of feminism. In the introduction to her celebrated work *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir made the poignant observation: “He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (26). Such othering discriminates women in social spaces, denying them even of their voice to express choice, desire or dissent. Caught in the interstices of inequality, many women are left mute; destined to silently suffer the sanctioned violence in patriarchal societies.

The UN General Assembly in its *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* defines the term ‘violence against women’ as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (3). Ironically, many acts of violence against women are not even considered by the society as a violation of the above definition simply because they exist to perform the threefold function of protecting modesty, preserving honour, and curbing the ‘undesirable’ thoughts and feelings of the womenfolk.

Modesty, honour, and sexuality are three key concepts engraved deeply into our collective psyche by the patriarchal culture. Most human societies take (and in the process give) great pains to enforce on its members the ‘venerated’ notions of modesty and honour. Sexuality, on the other hand, has long been considered an inappropriate topic that when applied to women, is regarded downright a sin. Here, it should be remembered that the female body has always been objectified in almost all patriarchal cultures. The male gaze views women as erotic objects that exist for male sexual gratification, thereby dehumanizing and devaluing them into just body parts as opposed to whole persons with free will and autonomy. This is an awful state of existence wherein the triad of modesty, honour, and (denied) sexuality together form a deadlock that fashion entirely new definitions to torture.



Among the many definitions of modesty listed in the Cambridge Dictionary is the one identifying it as a feminine quality of dressing or behaviour that ensures that no sexual interest is aroused in the onlooker. Though the dictionary classifies the definition as being old-fashioned, many societies insist on holding fast to it and to preserve such immaculate modesty they resort to practices which often tend to be sadistic in implementation. Out of modesty, the female population is asked to behave; to keep to themselves, not to get too friendly with men, and to be ashamed of their bodies and sexuality.

A divorcee and mother of two was gang raped in a moving car and thrown out of it not so long ago in our country. She was an educated woman, employed in an MNC, and was out one February night in 2012 to relax over a drink with her friends at a nightclub. She was neither drunk nor did she ask to be raped. And yet when she was gang raped, the society refused to see her as a victim. People branded her immodest saying that she had brought it upon herself. Commenting on the Kolkata Park Street rape case, Lakshmi Chaudhry quotes a fine upstanding citizen's view that if a woman goes to a night club, consumes alcohol, and flirts with men; then she deserves what has happened to her. Even the law was uncooperative and the then Chief Minister of West Bengal called her a liar. It was only after a long battle that her case was even registered.

This is the unfortunate but true fate of women who dare to think that they are equal to men. Commenting on the Delhi gang rape and murder case of 2012 that shook the nation, the then Maharashtra MLA Abu Azmi is quoted by Mukherjee and Shinde in *The Times of India* article as saying that rape instances are bound to be higher in the urban culture where skimpily dressed women are out with their boyfriends late into the night. According to him, in rural areas, women dress properly and are mostly confined to their homes thereby saving themselves from being raped. It is a sad state of affairs that an elected representative of the free and equal citizens of India holds such a view. If such observations were true, what about the cases of modestly clad women being violated even in the confines of their own homes?

The aforementioned view presupposes that those who keep to themselves are safe from any kind of sexual violence. Unfortunately, that is not the case. They are targeted more simply because they mostly tend to be insecure introverts or in other words; easy prey. That we hear only a few instances of incestuous or custodial rape cases does not mean that they do not happen frequently. Haderlie identifies the cultural practice of victim blaming that condemn the victim rather than the



perpetrator as the chief reason behind the low number of cases being reported. She further argues that since in India a family's honour is regarded as being coterminous with the daughter's purity, instances of rape are hushed thereby denying the victim her right to justice.

Moving on to the human body; it is a beautiful thing and yet we are taught to be ashamed of it. It is generally considered immodest to love or flaunt one's body except along aesthetic lines. Women experience the stigma more acutely due to the intersectionality of gender and moral taboos. The female body, in its identity as the other, has constantly been portrayed as impure resulting in practices like period shaming. Menstruation, which was once celebrated in cultures that practiced fertility rites has become a tool to subjugate the female spirit. Commenting on the topic, McHugh identifies cultural attitudes as the operating force behind the secrecy and silence of women regarding menstruation; resulting in the birth of menstrual shame.

Acknowledging the fact that promoting menstrual talk is the only viable form of resistance, our state has vehemently challenged the menstrual taboos and period shaming. Rejecting the negative cultural images of the female body as being diseased, deficient or imperfect; positive menstrual conversations have contributed to the gradual effacement of the period stigma. The Kerala society has begun to realise that it is a pitiable tradition wherein women are made to believe that they are impure when they are menstruating. Nevertheless, there still are people who refuse to unlearn and relearn in this regard. Menstruation is nothing but the periodic discharge of blood and endometrium (the inner lining of the uterus). In pregnancy, when the ovum gets fertilized, this lining nourishes the embryo. So, logically speaking, this fluid is a source of life for the embryo. Far from being impure, it has the capability to give and sustain life. Yet it is deemed as a violation of the feminine code of conduct to regard menstruation as something normal and not as the time of month when one is 'impure.'

When it comes to honour, our culture is driven by an insane obsession. Strangely enough it is practised on the human and more specifically the female body. In a land of honour killings, the fixation on virginity however is limited to women. When a match is made, it is always the girl's virginity that is questioned. In the twenty first century progressive India, as reported by TNN, a prominent South Indian actress was subjected to severe social censure and charged with no less than 23 cases when in an interview she commented on pre-marital sex and virginity with the observation that no educated person will insist on the virginity of his bride.



The Arab writer and social commentator, Sana Al Khayat is quoted by Mehri and Sills as relating the concept of virginity with that of control. She states that if a girl is a virgin then she will not be able to compare her husband's sexual prowess with that of other men. Since experience enhances sexual knowledge, it will make her stronger and more powerful in the gendered discourse. The patriarchal hegemony refuses to accept women in control of the discursive power play of sexuality. Consequently, attempts to curb female sexuality are almost always made in terms of the necessity to safeguard virginity. This scenario is not exclusive to the Middle East. As stated in the Department of Health & Social Care's "Hymenoplasty: Background Paper," 89% of respondents in a UK study had undergone hymenoplasty to escape the social stigma of not being regarded as a virgin. Expulsion from their families and fear of honour killings were the most recurrent reasons for opting the procedure.

Yet another procedure that demands attention is female circumcision. It is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as all procedures that result in the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or cause any other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. This is yet another form of torture performed on the female body in the name of upholding honour and tradition. It is practised as a cultural ritual by ethnic groups in many countries in Africa, some in Asia, the Middle East, and within immigrant communities in other parts of the world.

Female genital mutilation is typically carried out, with or without anaesthesia, by a traditional circumciser using a knife or razor. As explained by the WHO, the practice involves one or more of an array of procedures that range from the removal of all or part of the clitoris and clitoral hood, all or part of the clitoris and inner labia, to the most severe form (infibulation): all or part of the inner and outer labia and the fusion of the wound. In this last procedure, which the WHO calls Type III FGM, a small hole is left for the passage of urine and menstrual blood, and the wound is opened up for intercourse and childbirth. The procedure contributes to recurrent infections, chronic pain, infertility, epidermoid cysts, and complications during childbirth and fatal bleeding.

The practice, though classified as an act of violence against women by the UN General Assembly's *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*, is an ethnic marker. Rooted in gender inequality, it is supported by both women and men in countries that practise it; particularly by the women, who see it as a source of honour and authority, and an essential part of raising a daughter well. The circumcised girls' mothers are allowed to become members of the Council



of Entering, a position of some authority, which is yet another reason to support the practice. To engrave the necessity of the procedure further into the psyche of the community, the women who refuse to undergo the procedure are often made outcast, declared unmarriageable, and mostly left with no means of livelihood other than prostitution.

Such atrocities are still perpetrated in the name of preserving modesty and defending honour. This posits the questions: Whose modesty and whose honour? Who defines modesty and honour, and why are they gender specific? Blaming a rape victim of being immodest or losing her honour or that of her family is as ridiculous as blaming the tsunami victims for bringing the calamity upon themselves. History testifies that in most cultures vengeance is fulfilled and victory is celebrated on the body of the female. But the war casualties extend way beyond known and recorded battles. The society turns a blind eye towards the violence committed in the crusade to rescue modesty and honour as such acts are classified not as acts of brutality but as indispensable measures to ensure time-honoured social norms.

Unfortunately, these norms that vehemently uphold modesty and honour stay passive on the topic of female sexuality. The female body has long been regarded as an object to appease the male libido. However, the idea of female sexuality is still considered a taboo in most parts of the world. The patriarchal society's definition of women does not acknowledge them as human beings with sexual instincts and desires. Though sex is a primal instinct, the suppression of female sexual urges has been a mainstay of patriarchal discourses.

History has witnessed cultures that have resorted to chastity belts and cages designed for the purpose of preserving chastity. Curiously enough, these chastity guards were believed not only to protect the wearer from being raped but also to curb sexual urges. Even in the West, where prenuptial coitus and one-night stands are perceived to be quite common, the idea of female sexuality openly discussed on public platforms is frowned upon by the guardians of tradition and morality. This is a direct outcome of the patriarchal society's hegemonic interpellation of female sexual identity. As observed by Mulvey, "Women's desire is subjected to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound" (7). The society that objectifies women regulates their sexuality by confining it within the bounds of reproduction.

Obviously, such unjust forms of social censure are sure to evoke stiff defiance. Feminist theory, since its inception, has toiled to disrupt the capillaries modes of patriarchal hegemony still existing in modern societies. The history of feminist



resistance against the denial of female sexuality has been proclaimed by many brave voices. In the opening chapter of her revolutionary work *My Secret Garden: Women's Sexual Fantasies*, Nancy Friday recalls the response of a former lover of hers who mid-sex asks her to tell him what she was thinking about. Friday says, "As I'd never stopped to think before doing anything to him in bed (we were that sure of our spontaneity and response), I didn't stop to edit my thoughts. I told him what I'd been thinking. He got out of bed, put on his pants and went home" (6). The lover's response typifies the puritanical attitude of the society to female sexuality.

The scenario has not changed much down the ages. The scene from the acclaimed 2021 movie *The Great Indian Kitchen* where the wife asks for some foreplay is a case in point. She is immediately slut-shamed by her husband who is appalled by the fact that his wife is knowledgeable about sexual acts. He is the product of a society that condones a man who sleeps around but will never miss the chance to censure a woman if she even thinks about anything along sexual lines. If a man has many sexual partners then he is admired for being virile; if a woman (who the constitution and the law say is his equal) tries to take a leaf out of his book, then she is branded a slut. Strange are the ways of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Following the success of *My Secret Garden*, Friday brought out many more works on female sexual fantasies. She gave a platform for women to air their most cherished and secret fantasies. Though most contributions were made anonymously, Friday's works are punctuated with the relief women the world over have felt in knowing that they are not alone in fashioning and resorting to sexual fantasies whether it be to pass an otherwise lazy afternoon or even during coitus. Many contributors have had a very strict upbringing and have been taught to abstain from sex and sexual fantasies. Their sexual curiosity was constantly curbed forcing them to suppress their basic instinct. Resultantly, even after they grew up, got married (or not) and began to have regular sexual intercourse, they continued to stifle their sexual fantasies for fear of being branded promiscuous.

If this is the scenario in the liberal West, what can be said about our nation? Though India is famed as being the land of the *Kama Sutra*, which is a celebrated treatise on eroticism, sexuality, and the art of living a happy and fulfilling life; female sexual fantasies are still looked down upon. A woman's sex life beyond wedlock is regarded not only as a taboo but also an unpardonable sin. To save our girls from such abhorrent fate, Sube Singh Samain, the leader of the social council Khap Panchayat for the state of Haryana (quoted in Rizwan) came up with the brilliant plan that girls should be married off at the age of 16 so that they have their



husbands to fulfil their sexual needs, and hence do not need to go elsewhere to satisfy their sexual urges.

This is a highly alarming suggestion that promotes child marriage as a countermeasure to bridle sexual urges in teenage girls. We pride ourselves in being a nation that respects women. We are the ever ardent worshippers of female goddesses. But is it respect and consideration to deny someone their right to equality or to stifle their instincts and feelings in the name of outdated definitions of decorum and honour? Feminist theory is oriented at disrupting the established hegemony of such oppression. The tendency to brand women immodest when they try to assert their presence in the discourse of power or to acquire shame resilience is just an interpellative strategy to safeguard the interests of the patriarchal society.

Thanks to the popular media, this awareness is on the rise but it is yet to percolate to the grassroots level. Only a collective and persistent effort can exorcise the physical and psychological demons of female suppression disguised as reasonable societal norms. Notions of modesty and honour are perhaps a part of our world; but they are just one part. They should not be permitted to rule our world or be our world. The stifling of female identity and sexuality in the name of modesty or honour cannot be condoned by any definition. More efforts to raise awareness in this regard and to help women overcome internalized sexism are imperative for women to live truly free lives as the rightful citizens of a democratic world.

### Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage eBook, 2011, Uberty, [https://uberty.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/1949\\_simone-de-beauvoir-the-second-sex.pdf](https://uberty.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/1949_simone-de-beauvoir-the-second-sex.pdf). PDF file.
- Chaudhry, Lakshmi. "The Kolkata Rape Case: She Was Just Asking for It!" *First Post*, Network18, 16 Feb. 2012, <https://www.firstpost.com/living/the-kolkata-rape-case-she-was-just-asking-for-it-215689.html>. Accessed 07 June 2025.
- Department of Health & Social Care. "Hymenoplasty: Background Paper." *GOV.UK*, 23 Dec. 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/expert-panel-on-hymenoplasty/hymenoplasty-background-paper>. Accessed 22 June 2025.
- "Female Genital Mutilation." *World Health Organization*, 31 Jan. 2025, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation>. Accessed 05 June 2025.
- Friday, Nancy. *My Secret Garden: Women's Sexual Fantasies*. Quartet Books, 1998.
- Haderlie, Chloe. "Sexual Assault against Women in India." *Ballard Brief*, Dec. 2017, <https://ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs/sexual-assault-against-women-in-india>. Accessed 21 June 2025.
- McHugh, Maureen C. "Menstrual Shame: Exploring the Role of 'Menstrual Moaning'." *The*



- Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, edited by Chris Bobel et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 409–422. DOI:10.1007/978-981-15-0614-7\_32. Accessed 21 June 2025.
- Mehri, Najlaa Abou, and Linda Sills. “The Virginity Industry.” *BBC News*. 24 April 2010, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/8641099.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8641099.stm). Accessed 04 June 2025.
- “Modesty.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, Cambridge University Press, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/modesty>. Accessed 06 June 2025.
- Mukherjee, Meghana, and Srishti Ghosh Shinde. “How Dare...?” *The Times of India*, 07 Nov. 2016, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/how-dare-/articleshow/55263852.cms>. Accessed 06 June 2025.
- Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Screen*, Vol. 6, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6-18. Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/Screen\\_Volume\\_16\\_Issue\\_3/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/Screen_Volume_16_Issue_3/mode/2up). Accessed 21 June 2025.
- Rizwan, Sahil. “18 Comments Glorifying Rape That Have Been Broadcast in India.” *BuzzFeed*. 04 March. 2015, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/sahilrizwan/the-r-word>. Accessed 07 June 2025
- The Great Indian Kitchen*. Directed by Geo Baby, performances by Suraj Venjaramood and Nimisha Sajayan. Mankind Cinemas, Symmetry Cinemas, and Cinema Cooks, 2021.
- TNN. “Khusboo’s Comment on Virginity Irks SC.” *The Times of India*, 20 Jan. 2010, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/khusboos-comment-on-virginity-irks-sc/articleshowprint/5477756.cms>. Accessed 04 June 2025
- United Nations General Assembly. *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*. United Nations, 23 Feb. 1994. file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/A\_RES\_48\_104-EN.pdf, PDF download.