

STRENGTHENING THE “STRONG MAN-HELPLESS WOMAN” STEREOTYPE

AS part of the March 8 campaign in Delhi, four street plays on rape were prepared by three theatre groups. I saw these plays presented to a wide range of audiences – from a motley crowd of idlers in Connaught Place Park to an all-women audience in the nurses’ hostel, to a group of intellectuals after a seminar. And each time I saw the plays and the audience response to them, I felt more and more uneasy, unhappy.

The people involved in making and acting the plays had put in a great deal of sincere hard work. But the question arises : What were these plays trying to convey to the viewer? How is it that the response of male viewers was, at best, pity for the woman and at worst, open gratification when rape was acted out and a lot of amused sympathy for the rapists? Even more alarming was the uneasy giggling of the women viewers as if to deny that this could have anything to do with them. In fact the plays did have very little to do with women – they spoke to men, they reflected reality as men see it.

All the plays reinforced the idea of the Strong Man and the Weak Helpless Woman. Not one of the women was shown fighting back. One after another they succumbed with a heartrending scream. What would be the overall impact of seeing images of violence by men and limp helplessness of women, repeated again and again? Is such a presentation calculated to make women feel the need for struggle, for fighting back ? Will it not terrify women even more, reinforce all the myths about rape – that it is only if you go out alone, if you are without a male protector or if he is poor and cannot protect you that you will get raped ? Significantly, not one of the plays hinted at rape within the family which is the most common form of molestation of women.

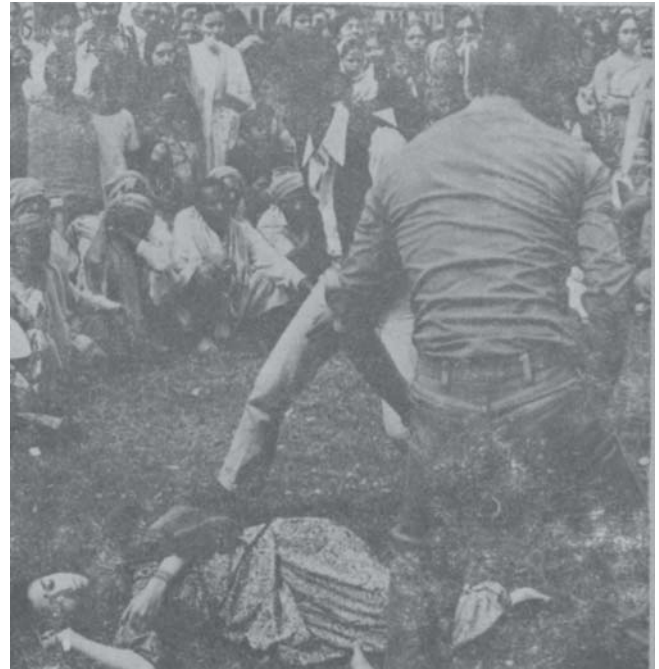
For instance in the Jagriti group’s attempt at recreating the Mathura case, the girl spoke about three words in the entire play and kept her head demurely covered throughout. Even worse, not her anguish and anger but that of her would-be husband was highlighted. It was he who screamed: “Dogs! You have dared lay your hands on the honour of my Mathura!”

At the end of the play, the woman who acts Mathura, addresses the audience, saying : “Today, this has happened to me. Tomorrow it could happen to you.” This statement, in itself a radical expression to women’s common struggle, invariably provoked laughter. This was quite natural, because the audiences were usually predominantly male, and secondly, the whole play based on patriarchal norms, on the idea of

women as the possessions of men, led to a different conclusion. After a few shows, the group realized this and changed the line to “This could happen to your daughter, your sister, your mother.” It was good that this change was made because a play addressed to men inadvertently ending with a call to women was too much of an incongruity.

In the Jan Natya Manch play *Police Charitram*, the first scene showed a man being robbed and the second a woman being raped, in both cases the police acting in collusion with the criminals. The implication was clear: the woman has lost something precious – presumably the “treasure of her virtue.” This concept of Rape as Theft rather than as a specific form of violence against women, is rooted in the concept of women as commodities to be either preserved or stolen. The whole experience of rape was seen from the outside. The only reaction around was: “Poor thing!” The woman’s own feelings, her anger, were nowhere articulated. Women’s strength was utterly denied – men were shown taking the initiative in protesting against the crime. The women only wept.

So also, in their other play *Aurat*, the rapists are “goondas.”



“Strong Man, Helpless Woman”-What is the Message to Women?

Where do they come from, what do they do at home ? We are not told. They wear coloured scarves so that they are immediately identified as Hindi film semi-heroes semi-villains. They even burst into a film song when a girl student goes past: “*Chali gori college chali...*” The audience reacted exactly as they would to Shatrughan Sinha – the men with a mixture of attraction, admiration and amusement, the women with a faint imitation of the men’s response mixed with uneasiness and fear. Repeatedly, the act of rape was symbolized by the woman lying in a prone position, the men bending over her. To see this could only psychologically paralyse a woman and gratify a man somewhere deep down, even though his conscious response might be one of “moral indignation.”

The script of Ruchika’s play was written by a woman and the difference of viewpoint was definitely evident. There was a much greater proportion of articulate women to men in the cast. Social attitudes – the fact that the woman is blamed, called immoral, rejected, thrown out by her own family – were highlighted. So were some of the myths about rape – that women invite it, want it. These myths were completely ignored by the other plays, even though such accusations had been hurled at Mathura by the Supreme Court itself.

In this play, the woman protests, she screams back at the judge in court. The law as it operates against women was ironically treated. But again, the play was ultimately addressed to men – men must change the situation. It ended with a question: “is this girl (the raped girl) the mother, sister or daughter of any of you?”

When the plays were enacted in public places the audience was invariably three-fourths male for the simple reason that women couldn’t push through the crowd for fear of being pawed.

At first, I had felt that the positive feature of such theatre was that it dared to speak a hitherto unspeakable word. But the experience of watching the plays acted again and again, made me realize that the word has been unspeakable only for women. Men have always boasted about it, laughed about it, occasionally deplored it in fine language, made laws to protect themselves. So what is the use of talking about rape, if we only strengthen the stereotypes ?

The most painful experience of such strengthening was at the nurses’ hostel when the plays were literally drowned in continuous giggling by the women. This no doubt confirmed for the men who were acting the play, the “silliness” of these women. But it was actually a form of protest - a protest against our reality being distorted and a refusal to accept this distortion as anything that touches us. The laughter was a way of saying “No. That’s not it. In fact, that’s so far from the truth, it makes me laugh.” A dramatic expression of the meaning of Rape can only say NO to stereotypes when women come together to express what rape means to us, has meant to us through the centuries, and what we will no longer allow it to mean in the future.

- Ruth Vanita



—Primila D.

Have you ever watched your cigarette in the dark ?
Lights off, the curtains a shadowed tapestry
and crouched under the blanket, this tip of light the
sole accompaniment to your thoughts ?

And you snuff it out –
all that remains – the stub and the ashes,
forlorn, in the ashtray

It reminds me, in a strange kind of way
of the girls I’ve known.

Classmates, hostel mates,
other females who also came to those
Institutions of learning –
Very Nice Girls.

This very niceness sums up the quality of their existence.
Their glow definitely existent like the cigarette in the dark but
just as feeble and transient.

Each one so ill-defined, so separately indistinguishable,
their thoughts in inherited convention,
their actions parent-dominated-dictated.

The only expression
of their unconscious striving towards individuality
might have been an affair on the sly
that would fill them in days to come
with martyred feelings –
heroines of a trival melodrama.

And at some stage,
the last traces are slowly snuffed out.

They proceed to the altar –
Secure, Calm Vegetations.

- Sonal Radia