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FIRAAQ: A STUDY OF WOMEN GULPED IN THE VORTEX OF GENDER, COMMUNITY AND CLASS

Ankita Rathee¹✉, Rekha²

Abstract:

Communalism has been a dominating factor of 'secular' India especially post-Partition and is often accompanied by deeply rooted religious prejudices resulting in vengeance and hatred. The communal violence at various times in the past half-a-century brings forward the barbarity exhibited in the name of religion. These incidents have captured the imagination of several filmmakers from time to time. One such film is *Firaaq*, which sheds light on the various contours of Gujarat violence. The present paper analyses the women characters of the film to reveal the implications of communal disturbances on them and facilitate a discourse on the associated multi-layered ramifications. The focus is on how communal rampages shape or alter the experiences of women owing to their varied religions and class positions in the society.

Keywords: Communal consciousness, Violence, Patriarchy, Silence, Resistance, Religion

Firaaq, a 2008 film by Nandita Das is about the life of some very ordinary people affected by Gujarat carnage in 2002. These people belong to different religions, castes, and classes of society representing the pluralistic society of India. The film is set a month after the riots where it follows the life of all the characters for 24 hours. The myriad mix of characters in the film can be categorized into three kinds – victims, perpetrators, and silent observers of violence of 2002. The film provides an insight into the aftermath of violence that shook the lives of masses and must be recognised “for its exploration of the ways in which a complex intersection of class, faith, and hegemonic ideology simultaneously subjugates the other as well as opens up for it possibilities of dissent” (Kurian, 2016, p.120). According to Gyanendra Pandey (1990), “In its common Indian usage the word ‘communalism’ refers to a condition of suspicion, fear and hostility between members of different religious communities.... [it] can refer to Hindu-Muslim or Hindu-Sikh conflict in northern India, Brahman-non-Brahman conflict in southern and western India....” (p. 7) *Firaaq* is an analysis of post riots period with focus on communalism as a major factor affecting the quotidian lives and experiences of the people.

The violence – physical or psychological against women – has always been a significant characteristic of any communal violence – reducing them into mere ‘revenge sites’ with their bodies, souls, identities, and existences often bruised and crumbled under the name of ‘religion’.

1 [Author] Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Humanities, Deenbandhu Chhotu Ram University of Science & Technology, Murthal, 131039, Sonapat, Haryana, INDIA

2 [Author] ✉ [Corresponding Author] Professor, Department of Humanities, Deenbandhu Chhotu Ram University of Science & Technology, Murthal, 131039, Sonapat, Haryana, INDIA. E-mail: rekha.hum@dcrustm.org

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Gujarat was no exception in this regard and it must also be duly noted that it was characterised by an unprecedented display of gender-based violence against the minority lower-class women.

The present paper seeks to analyse various women characters in the film, *Firaaq* and how their experiences were shaped/alterd by communal riots, owing to their different religions and class-positions in the society. The paper broadly categorises the women characters based on their class, that is, the lower working-class, the upper business-class and the middle-class and examine their experiences correspondingly.

According to Achin Vanaik (2009):

While caste and class relations are essentially vertical, gender relations are both horizontal and vertical. Violence against women has a scale, depth and frequency that is simply unmatched by any other kind of violence. While caste and class violence also have a normalised and quotidian character, gender violence is uniquely pervasive. It is not just episodic and collective but has a distinctive familial, individualised and privatised character. It also traverses all boundaries, and all other forms of political violence also express themselves in specifically gendered ways – rape, beating and humiliation of women being part of the process of establishing the authority/dominance of class, caste, ethnic group or government. (p. 145)

The women characters of the film have pervasive experiences of communal violence, yet these are familial and individualised owing to their class. Muneera (played by Shahana Goswami) and Jyoti (played by Amruta Subhash), the two friends belong to the lower working-class of the society. Jyoti is Muneera's Hindu best-friend and both earn by applying heena. However, apart from occasionally applying heena, it seems, prior to the outbreak of violence, Muneera also used to work at Sameer (played by Sanjay Suri) and Anuradha's (played by Tisca Chopra) place, where Muneera and her husband Hanif (played by Nawazuddin Siddiqui) were given refuge during the riots. Post carnage when Muneera and Hanif return to their home, they come face-to-face with the repercussions of communal frenzy. They find their house and all its belongings completely destroyed and burnt to ashes. This devastates the two and to add to Muneera's miseries, Hanif outpours his frustration on her by abusing her. Even though, both Muneera and Hanif are shown as earning members of the family, yet Muneera is disproportionately affected by the riots, for it is not only the loss of house for her but also the abuse of her husband. Muneera's character is symbolic of lower-class women's triple victimization—community, class, and gender. Whereas on one hand, she is distraught by her uprooting and complete destruction of her home; on the other, she also has to bear with her husband's frustration.

Through the characters of Muneera and Jyoti, the film sheds light on how communal violence affects already existing/mutual relationships of people belonging to different communities. Prior to the carnage, both would work as a team for the occasional heena applying jobs. However, post-carnage their relationship takes a U-turn and Muneera is seen constantly growing suspicious of Jyoti with a feeling that she had a role to play in destroying her house. Throughout the film, Jyoti is seen trying to comfort a vexed Muneera; thereby, defiantly breaching the existing divisionist politics. On the contrary, Muneera suspiciously questions every movement and gesture of her friend presuming them to be guilt of, what Muneera thinks, Jyoti has supposedly done and not as a friend out of sympathy. When Jyoti brings food for Muneera, the latter questions as to how did the former know that they did not have any food at home. To this, Jyoti replies that she only had a faint idea and did not know for sure that the house was completely destroyed. Every now and then Muneera keeps interrogating Jyoti about her whereabouts during the violence. In communally fragile environment, a sense of polarization is bound to escalate when confronted with communal violence.

Although, Jyoti is not affected by the riots directly, yet her relationship with Muneera seems to have shaken in its aftermath. Even small gestures such as bringing food to a Muslim friend have to be done stealthily fearing retaliation from the family. The fear of association with the 'other' community lingers in the society as an after-effect of the communal violence and this is highlighted through Jyoti who does not have an innate communal consciousness; still, the social surroundings enforce checks on her interaction with her Muslim friend.

Jyoti and Muneera's working-class background are almost akin. Yet, where on one hand, the mere allegiance to a particular community comes with certain privileges; on the other, these privileges are also marred by virtue of one's gender. The "dissident friendship" (Kurian, 2016, p. 123) between the two, renders ineffective when confronted with patriarchal structures. Jyoti uses her communal privilege to the collective advantage of herself and Muneera – as seen in the *bindi* swapping incident while entering the Hindu wedding function, driving through crowded streets and past police checkpoint; however, her privileges are marred by the mere virtue of her gender – as seen when Jyoti hides Muneera in her house. The fact that Jyoti stealthily provides refuge to Muneera and advises her not to make noise so as to cover her presence in her Hindu residence, is reflective as a loss of her gendered self-agency. According to Kurian (2016),

As a result, while Firaq refuses to essentialize the majority-minority communities by articulating "contrapuntal perspectives" . . . that center the human connection between people from heterogeneous communities, its location within the context of class-based patriarchal oppression chips away at its efficacy. (p. 123)

In a country which is communally fragile, a sense of polarization is bound to escalate when confronted with communal violence. With all the help and assistance provided by Jyoti, the simmering communal prejudice of Muneera finally comes forth when Jyoti complains of losing her religious pendant. Muneera assumes it to be the same pendant which Hanif found in the debris of their burnt house and ultimately confronts Jyoti by accusing her of being involved in burning of her house. The scene which starts with a confrontational stance at the betrayal of a friend soon changes to that of guilt, helplessness and remorse. When Jyoti's pendant is found lying on the floor of her house, Muneera feels overwhelmed and breaks down in guilt for being suspicious of her friend. Nevertheless, Jyoti understanding the communal polarization and prejudice that the carnage has induced not only in Muneera, but also in her own family, cries her heart out with her best friend. Both feel helpless and powerless in the current communal-patriarchal milieu.

Firaq brings to fore the nuanced complexities that such shaking events like communal violences bring into the lives of people. Mutual bonds and communal harmony convulses and polarizations are created, making it difficult to undo these communal effects. The communal identities which hitherto remained latent/immaterial suddenly become basis for affinity as well as aversion.

Anuradha Desai is an upper-class educated Hindu woman married to an upper business-class Muslim man called Sameer Arshad Sheikh. She is portrayed as a 'modern' Indian woman with a critical intellect to decipher the communally charged events happening around her. Sameer's fear and burden of his Muslim identity makes Anuradha concede to his decision of relocating in Delhi, making ". . . the very universality, pervasiveness and constancy of female oppression in and across all social relations . . . to deprive it of the more specific charge and power" (Vanaik, 2009, p.145). Her position as a loving wife makes her sacrifice the love she has for her native city as well as her music classes with Khan Saheb, knowing well enough that geographical re-location will not make a difference to their situation. Although, Anuradha symbolises the 'modern' educated woman of 'secular' India; yet she recognises the inherent communal nature of her country. Deprived of the

more 'specific charge and power', Anuradha's agency bows down to Sameer's communal fear and her choice to remain in the city, takes a back seat.

Anuradha fully realises the fear faced by minority community and at no instance is she seen being prejudiced against them. While talking to her sister Ketki (played by Sucheta Trivedi), she does acknowledge the fact that in the communally charged environment she is thankful that her husband's name is Sameer and not some overtly Muslim name. Also, when confronted with police while having an omelette with Sameer at a tea stall, she panics when Sameer addresses his real identity of being a Muslim. She fears for her husband's safety and never blames him or his religion as the cause of frenzy.

On the other hand, Anuradha's sister Ketki represents the conformist upper-class Hindu woman. She is true reflection of a part of society coloured by communal bigotries. Prejudiced towards the Muslim community, she justifies the communal violence as Newtonian action-reaction. When Anuradha expresses her angst, "People have been raped, killed and burnt alive for no fault of theirs" (Das, 2008,00:37:30), Ketki counters it by saying, "Anu, there are always two sides to a coin. If *those* [italics mine] people hadn't started this violence, things would not have been this bad" (Das, 2008,00:37:30). According to Ghanshyam Shah (1994), "Riots . . . reinforce communal identity. An individual who has internalised communal consciousness may or may not participate directly in riots but tends to legitimise violence" (p.1133). This internalised communal nature and its associated consciousness is clearly visible in Ketki, who tries to justify the violence as an action-reaction process.

Shah (1994) argues how when, "a cultural identity takes a political form, differentiations between 'we' and 'they' get sharper and hardened" (p. 1133). As in case of Ketki, the communal lines seem to have 'hardened' as she often addresses the Muslims as "those people" and is also seen questioning Anuradha if the latter has ever regretted marrying a Muslim. The fact that Ketki is meagrely prejudiced against Sameer, is apparently due to his upper-class belonging, his habits of occasional drinking (which is banned in Islam) and not reading *namaz* makes him "so not a Muslim" and thus, not someone to be rebuffed. The degree of Sameer's cultural identity instilled in him makes him amiable to Ketki and her likes. Ketki symbolises the latent communal consciousnesses which suddenly starts emanating at the slight sight of communal disturbances; unlike Anuradha who is untouched by communal bigotries. Even-though Anuradha and Ketki are sisters belonging to the same religion and class, yet they represent two opposite communal ideologies.

Another character in the film called Aarti (played by Deepti Naval) is portrayed as a Hindu middle-class housewife, who is often subjected to domestic violence and abuse. She is a constant and silent victim of the patriarchal setup of her family. Her husband Sanjay (played by Paresh Rawal) and brother-in-law Deven (played by Dilip Joshi) are staunch Hindu fundamentalist characters. Aarti's character is majorly affected by the virtue of her gendered which is deeply trapped in the vicious patriarchy. Zoya Hasan and RituMenon (2004) notes, "Indian culture is strongly gender stratified, characterized by cultural and social practices that exclude women, with hierarchal/patriarchal relations in which fathers or husbands have authority over family members" (p. 238).

What is rather important is her position as a silent observer of violence outside and a silent victim of the violence inside her house. Ensnared in the patriarchal hegemony, Aarti is seen pouring hot oil over her wrist as a punishment for not being able to save a half-burnt Muslim woman during

violence. Constantly haunted and hallucinated by the image of that helpless woman, Aarti deeply wishes for redemption which she finds when she meets Mohsin – a little orphaned Muslim boy. To make amends she immediately takes Mohsin under her care. However, standing at the intersection of gender and community, Aarti introduces Mohsin as Mohan – a servant boy. The class and communal barriers hinders her acceptance of Mohsin as ‘Mohsin’ and not as ‘Mohan’. Kurian (2016) notes, “[Nandita] Das unambiguously portrays the unfathomable gulf that separates them [Aarti and Mohsin]: not only is his Muslim identity stripped away but also can he only be recognized within the subordinate position of a servant boy” (p. 123).

Nonetheless, Mohsin’s escape after witnessing the domestic abuse of Sanjay on Aarti, makes Aarti realise her subservience to patriarchy; which she rejects by stepping over the threshold of her house (possibly in search of Mohsin). She tries to cleave unto the unfathomable gulf of religion and class which hinders her companionship with Mohsin by offering a non-violent resistance to communal-patriarchal politics.

Thus, we see that community, class and gender play an important role in the ability of a person to respond to a situation. When Ketki tries to dismiss whole communal situation as an outcome of an action-reaction between two communities, Anuradha strongly objects to her thoughts. The situation reverses during the wedding function, when both Muneera and Jyoti hear the bride’s targeting the Muslim community for dampening her wedding festivities. Where on one hand, Anuradha could boldly and out rightly dismiss the religious bigotry of Ketki, Muneera and Jyoti being on the rear end of the class hierarchy could not do so. Both of them kept mum to the indirect prejudices hurled against Muneera’s community simply because of their ranking in the class structure of the society. In the similar way, even Aarti is clutched by tentacles of community, class and gender in relation to her motherly tenderness for Mohsin.

Firaaq brings forth the complexities associated with gender, religious identities and class positioning which shape the alliances or divisions in a community during communal outbreaks. The working of class, community and gender are socially and culturally intertwined in ways which often put women, especially the women of victim community in precarious standings. According to Hasan and Menon (2004),

The axes of class, gender, and community are contingent on each other for they are constructed and experienced simultaneously, and thus create overlapping and mutually reinforcing forms of disadvantage and deprivation, most apparent in the subordination of Muslim women. They are disadvantaged thrice over: as members of a minority community, as women, and as poor women. While their lives are similarly positioned at the intersection of gender, class, and community within the dynamic context of Indian society, polity, and economy, their minority status qualitatively transforms their experiences in very distinct ways. Gender discrimination coalesces with class inequalities in perpetuating a structural disempowerment of Muslim women. (p. 242)

The character of Muneera who is ‘structurally disempowered’ stands the core of this gender, community, and class dynamics; whereas Anuradha, Jyoti and Aarti are ‘selectively’ dis/empowered majorly due to their gender.

The film poignantly sheds light on the gender-community-class aspect along with resultant intricacies of changing relationships and mindsets as a result of the riots. *Firaaq* is a nuanced representation of gender-class subjectivities and resistances which are sustained and offered during communal outbreaks. As Kurian (2016) says, “Solidarity and self-determination go hand in hand and necessarily involve working across difference by renouncing one’s class-based privileges” (p. 118).

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