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Severed Noses and Sexual Carrions: Caste, Honour, and the Radical Exclusion of Dalit Women from Brahmanical Patriarchy

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Abstract: ***In Brahmanical-patriarchal societies, honour, or izzat, is never seen as an individual attribute but as a collective male property that is symbolically located in the bodies and sexual conduct of "its" women, and ruthlessly policed through institutions like marriage, endogamy, and violence. As Prem Chowdhry states, "the honour of the entire biradari is believed to reside in the bodies of its women" (19), making the woman's body "the boundary marker of the caste" (63). Any perceived threat to female chastity, such as a self-chosen partner, an inter-caste union, is interpreted as an assault on collective male honour that must be "restored" through oppressive practices such as social boycott, honour killings, rapes and public humiliation.***

Prem Chowdhry in Contentious Marriages, Eloping Couples: Gender, Caste and Patriarchy in Northern India, provides a compelling exploration of this idea, highlighting how a family's or community's social standing is tied to the conduct and perceived purity of its women. This paper analyses how arranged endogamous marriage and the ritual of kanyadan transforms upper-caste women into vessels of caste purity and boundary-makers of the biradari; any deviation from this structure results in violent restoration of honour. However, the central argument of the paper is that Dalit women occupy a radically different position within the same honour economy, being excluded from the category of "honourable woman" and instead, relegated to the status of "sexual carrions," which makes them vulnerable to violence, with their bodies seen as sites for punishment, revenge, or lesson-teaching.

Key words: Sexual Carrions, Caste, Honour, Brahmanical Patriarchy, marriage, endogamy, violence.

Marriage, in patriarchal society, emerges as the most powerful tool for asserting male domination over women by controlling both their productive labour and reproductive capacities, as "the control of female sexuality is considered essential for the maintenance of caste purity and family honour" (Chowdhry 63). Through rigidly enforced arranged marriages and strict endogamy, upper caste women are transformed into vessels whose wombs must carry only "pure" blood of the biradari, ensuring that land, property, and caste status remain within the patriline across generations.

Uma Chakravarti deepens this analysis by locating the roots of this control in Brahmanical texts. She argues that marriage is never a contract between two individuals but a ritualised transfer of reproductive rights from one set of men to another through the institution of kanyadan- the gift of a virgin daughter (67). The bride is explicitly constructed as kshetra (field) and the groom as bija (seed); her womb is reduced to a vessel that must receive only the "pure" seed of the same or higher varna/jati in order to reproduce the vansa. This understanding implies that the purity of the male descent line (vansa) depends on the absolute chastity and obedience of its women; any prior sexual experience, or inter-caste alliance renders the women unfit for kanyadan and threatens the entire lineage with pollution and extinction. Therefore, "the regulation of marriage and sexuality is the central concern of Brahmanical texts" (Chakravarti 70), and to enforce this notion, the ideology of the ever-obedient, chaste, or pativrata woman is valorised.

Chowdhry traces this hierarchical valorisation of marriage forms directly back to the Manusmriti, which enumerates an eight-fold classification of marriages and ranks marriages based on kanyadan as the highest and most meritorious and non-kanyadan forms as the lowest and most condemned. The first four forms- Brahma, Daiva, Arsha, and Prajapatya- are categorised as dharmika (righteous), whereas, the remaining four- Gandharva, Asura, Raksasa, and Paisacha- are condemned as adharmika (unrighteous). Among these, the Gandharva marriage is considered the lowest in the brahmanical scale, as it involves "the voluntary union of a maiden and her lover" (Chowdhry 43), which completely bypasses the father's sacred right to perform kanyadan. This hierarchy is weaponised to label self-choice love marriages as Gandharva and inter-caste unions as Rakshas or Pisacha, thereby converting the couple into moral criminals who have brought irreparable shame upon the entire community. The most powerful metaphor through which this ideology is enacted is that of the "severed nose" (naak kata di). When a woman elopes or marries across caste lines, she is accused of having "cut the nose of the entire biradari". Honour, or izzat, is imagined as the nose of the collective male body, and its restoration can only be achieved by "re-attaching" it through violent actions such as social boycott, public humiliation, forced separation, or outright honour killings.

In khap-dominated villages of Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, caste panchayats openly declare that "our izzat resides in our daughters and daughters-in-law" and that only the annihilation or severe

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disciplining of the defiant woman can repair the community's mutilated honour. Chowdhry records numerous instances where khap leaders justified murder by invoking this exact formulation. In one such case from Rohtak district, a young Jat woman who eloped with a Chamar man was traced, and strangled by her brothers, after which the khap announced that "the girl had cut the nose of the entire biradari" and that killing had "restored the honour of the Jat community" (115). In another case from Kaithal (2004), Manoj and Babli were poisoned and dumped in a canal on khap orders for marrying within the same gotra, with the panchayat celebrating the act as necessary "to protect our izzat, which lives in our girls." These cases reveal a rigid patriarchal division of roles in the honour economy: where the woman is constructed as the passive repository of honour, while the man is positioned as its active regulator and guardian. They appoint themselves as the sole custodians of that honour, insisting that a woman has no right to choose her partner and that the consent of the male guardian is mandatory and non-negotiable. Any expression of female desire or agency is immediately interpreted as a dangerous threat to caste purity and patriarchal power, as Gupte observes that "the worst insult that can be hurled at a man…is to say that he cannot control 'his' women" (73), which transform guardianship into a public performance of masculinity, and control over women as mandatory to maintain caste purity.

To constrain the possibility of women asserting agency, patriarchal society upholds endogamy as the cornerstone of caste preservation, because endogamy is "the structural basis of caste hierarchy," where "the control of women's sexuality through endogamous marriages ensures the reproduction of caste inequality" (Rege 16-17). This ensures that marital alliances remain confined within jati boundaries to safeguard ritual purity and block any avenues for social or economic upward mobility among lower castes. Therefore, pratiloma marriages (lower caste men with upper caste women) provoke the most ferocious backlash, which can be seen in cases such as the 2016 Shankar-Kausalya honour killing in Tamil Nadu, a Dalit man (Shankar) was hacked to death by his upper caste Thevar wife's family, who viewed her as having "polluted the bloodline" through their union ("Udumalai Shankar Murder Case"). Similarly, popular cinema also explored this nexus, as seen in Dhadak 2 (2025, dir. Shazia Iqbal), a Hindi remake of the Tamil film Pariyerum Perumal, where lower caste law student Neelesh falls for upper caste Vidhi, only to face casteist violence, including targeted killings and institutional discrimination. These atrocities underscore how endogamy is designed to terrorise other lower-caste men and to discipline upper-caste women into submission.

However, while upper-caste women are violently disciplined as bearers of honour, Dalit women are violently excluded from the honour economy altogether and reduced to "sexual carrions" or "walking carrions"- bodies that are already symbolically dead, impure, yet sexually available. The rape or murder of a Dalit woman does not "cut the nose" of any biradari, does not trigger honour killings, and does not demand violent restoration because, in the savarna patriarchal imagination, Dalit women were never granted the status of "honourable women" in the first place. Their violation produces no shame for the perpetrator and no obligation of retribution for the community; it simply reaffirms caste hierarchy.

Gopal Guru articulates this structural difference by distinguishing between "respectable shame" (experienced by upper-caste women, which can be restored through violence) and "degraded humiliation" (inflicted upon Dalit women, a permanent ontological condition that disturbs no dominant-caste conscience). As Guru writes, "the humiliation of Dalit women is not seen as humiliation in the same sense in which the humiliation of upper-caste women is seen…the humiliation of Dalit women is a routine, everyday affair which does not disturb the moral conscience of the dominant castes" (9-10). Mandal further pushes this insight by considering Dalit women's bodies as "walking carrions (dead animals), savarnas stigmatize Dalits with dirt and shame…Dalit women are seen not only as bearers of untouchability and impurity but also the stigma and shame of lower caste men and sexual promiscuity…their bodies become the carriers of violations of Brahmanical patriarchal violence…they are exposed as sexually available even when they are 'untouchable'" (173-174). In other words, the same ideology that turns an upper-caste woman's body into a sacred vessel of caste purity transforms a Dalit woman's body into carrion that can be violated with absolute impunity, because the act of violation doesn't pollute the perpetrator; it merely confirms the pre-existing "deadness" of the victim. This concept explains why sexual violence against Dalit women almost never activates the honour-killing machinery; instead, it casts shame on their community.

In 1992, Bhanwari Devi was gang-raped by upper-caste Gujjar men in Rajasthan for preventing a child marriage; the sessions court later acquitted the accused on the grounds that upper-caste men could not possibly rape a lower-caste woman, an act considered too polluting for them ("Bhanwari Devi"). Similarly, in the 2020 Hathras case, a nineteen-year-old Valmiki woman was gang-raped by four upper-caste Thakur

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men; the police forcibly cremated her body against her family's wishes while dominant caste mobs celebrated the violence as "teaching Dalits a lesson" ("Hathras Gang Rape and Murder"). In none of these instances was any perpetrator ostracised, because in the Brahmanical honour economy, Dalit women's bodies are not considered as vessels to be protected but as carrion to be consumed.

Therefore, the emancipation of Dalit women cannot lie in extending the category of "honourable woman" to them, as that would only reproduce the same oppressive structure, but by dismantling the very notion of honour that has historically oppressed both upper-caste and Dalit women in different ways. Until this binary of honour-shame sustains, upper-caste women will remain imprisoned as bearers of honour, and Dalit women will continue to be treated as its sexual carrions.

Thus, this paper has explored that Brahmanical patriarch does not subject all women to a uniform regime of patriarchal control, but instead sustains a deeply caste-stratified honour economy that disciplines and annihilates women in radically different ways. For upper-caste women, honour (izzat) is constructed as a precious male property symbolically located in their bodies, and any assertion of marital choice is experienced as an intolerable attack on the community's honour, demanding violent restoration. Dalit women, by contrast, are structurally expelled from this very economy of honour and shame; they are denied the status of "honourable women" and are reduced to "sexual or walking carrions." This paper delves into revealing how the concept of honour itself is a deeply caste-specific tool of Brahmanical power rather than a generic patriarchal value. Therefore, true emancipation cannot mean the inclusion of Dalit women in the poisoned privilege of "honourable womanhood," instead it demands the dismantling of the honour-shame binary in its entirety.

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