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**SHAME, HONOUR, AND THE MORAL ECONOMY OF GENDER:  
FEMINIST RE-READINGS OF SOCIAL CONTROL IN INDIAN  
NARRATIVES**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines how shame and honour operate as disciplinary mechanisms within Indian literary narratives, arguing that gendered moral economies regulate female sexuality through symbolic violence rather than overt coercion alone. Beyond the idea of “respectability,” this paper examines how honour politics generate regimes of shame, which internalise social control in women’s bodies and subjectivities. Engaging feminist theories of moral economy, symbolic violence, and gendered nationalism, the paper examines **The God of Small Things, Sangati, Difficult Daughters**, and certain Dalit feminist literature to reveal how women’s desire, movement, and voice are regulated through collective norms of purity and reputation. This paper also engages literature on sexual violence, as well as media culture, to contextualise literary culture within broader cultural anxieties of honour. It reveals how shame is not only an affective state but also a social technology that reifies caste and patriarchal social hierarchies. By centring honour politics, this paper contributes to feminist literary studies in India, moving from domestic confinement to the broader domain of moral economy. These narratives reveal that gender justice requires dismantling honour-based moral economies that equate women’s sexuality with communal legitimacy.

**KEYWORDS:** honour politics, shame regimes, moral economy, symbolic violence, caste-gender regulation, feminist literary studies.

## ***1. INTRODUCTION: From Respectability to Shame Regimes***

In the Indian context, feminist literature has critically explored respectability politics—the idea that women are expected to uphold respectability to ensure their own safety and dignity. Yet, respectability does not entirely encapsulate the complex nature of gendered moral policing that exists through caste and community affiliations. In this article, I want to propose that we move beyond respectability politics and towards an examination of shame politics, the idea that honour is collectively held through women's bodies and sexuality.

In honour politics, shame is not necessarily externalised as a warning against transgression. Rather, women live with the possibility of shame and act accordingly. In such a politics, women's sexuality becomes community property, where any form of female transgression equates with community shame. In such a politics, shame becomes a tool that maintains caste and patriarchal orders.

In line with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence (2001), this study posits that honour is an unseen coercion. Social norms are natural and normal, but they sustain inequality. Feminist writers on sexual violence (Mangat, 2022; Durham, 2015) have shown how honour discourses position sexual assault as an affront to the community, not to the woman.

In its analysis of Arundhati Roy's **The God of Small Things**, Bama's **Sangati**, Manju Kapur's **Difficult Daughters**, and **Dalit feminist** testimonies, this article examines how regimes of shame shape female sexuality. These works reveal how honour is used as a means of control over women while maintaining patriarchal and caste dominance.

## ***2. Theoretical Framework: Honour Politics and Symbolic Violence***

The concept of honour-based social regulation has to be viewed in the context of gendered moral economy. Moral economy refers to a set of values that guides social legitimacy and community membership. In a patriarchal society, the issue of sexuality among women assumes a major role in the moral economy.

The concept of symbolic violence, as proposed by Bourdieu, explains how women internalise the regulation of their sexuality. Women consent to their own regulation because honour-based regulation is perceived as a sacred cultural norm rather than a violent regulation.

The concept of symbolic violence has been critiqued in the context of Dalit feminism. According to this body of literature (Paik, 2014; Mangat, 2022), honour-based regulation is stratified along caste lines. Upper-caste honour-based regulation focuses on purity and

lineage. Dalit women are both hyper-sexualised and denied the regulation of honour. Shame is a stratified concept.

Durham (2015) explains through his work how the media portrayal of rape often focuses on the idea of national dishonour rather than patriarchy. This further emphasises the idea that women represent community integrity.

By bringing all of this theoretical knowledge together, this study aims to understand shame as a structural concept. Literary texts are seen as a space in which honour politics are played out and problematised.

The feminist reading of the texts aims to understand symbolic violence and how it leads to compliance.

### ***3. Forbidden Desire and Public Humiliation in The God of Small Things***

In Roy's novel, **The God of Small Things**, Ammu's transgressive relationship with Velutha illustrates the destructive nature of honour politics. Her sexuality, which transcended caste boundaries, is depicted as a calamitous transgression against communal integrity. The harm perpetrated against her is not only physical but also spiritual, as she is portrayed as an embodiment of shame.

The text illustrates how family and police institutions work together to uphold honour by disciplining female sexuality. Ammu's body becomes a site for maintaining caste integrity. The "Love Laws" are depicted as guidelines for the acceptable parameters of love. These laws illustrate how love itself is a product of politics.

In this text, shame represents premonitory horror. The children that Ammu bore are depicted as living with the burden of her transgression. The community's objection to her affair with Velutha is not based on love but on issues of caste purity and patriarchal dominance. Female sexuality challenges the symbolic power that underpins upper-caste identity.

The text challenges the honour politics that it portrays through its narrative. Instead of condemning Ammu's desire, it critiques honour politics that transform love into a crime. The text achieves this through its fragmented narrative.

### ***4. Dalit Women and the Uneven Politics of Honour in Sangati***

Bama's **Sangati** provides a counter-narrative to the honour codes of the upper castes. Dalit women experience the tension of not being granted purity and simultaneously being objectified for their sexual nature. The honour codes for the marginalised population differ from the upper castes.

In the Dalit context, the need to survive is often pragmatic, not purity-obsessed. However, the larger society shames the Dalits through humiliation and sexual exploitation. The Dalit woman's body is subject to the assertion of caste dominance. Her sexual nature is policed not to perpetuate purity but to reinforce subordination.

The narrative by Bama emphasises the power of collective female storytelling as a form of resistance to honour codes. Shame is confronted, not internalised. By narrating the experiences of humiliation, the symbolic violence is broken down, and honour is stripped of its mystique to reveal it to be a tool of caste dominance. The tension in the Dalit experience complicates the notion of a unified feminist experience, as the honour codes do not impact all women in the same way. The honour politics, as exposed by the Dalit feminist narrative, is a complex relationship between the moral economy and the caste hierarchy.

### ***5. Education, Reputation, and Marriage in Difficult Daughters***

In **Difficult Daughters**, the search for love and learning is also a search for honour. Honour politics are involved in Virmati's relationship with the Professor because of the family scandal this relationship causes. Marriage is used instead of romance. Virmati's sexual desire is portrayed as a challenge to the family's honour. Her intellectual aspirations are also portrayed as fuelling the suspicion surrounding her.

The honour politics in the novel are set in the context of nationalism. As the nation seeks political liberation from colonial rule, women are still subject to the discipline of moral regulation. The nation's honour is tied to the regulation of femininity. The narrative in **Difficult Daughters** does not romanticise rebellion. Honour politics are also involved in the emotional split in the subject. Shame is an internal experience.

The narrative illustrates the extension of the moral economy from the body to the self.

### ***6. Shame as Cultural Discipline: Media, Violence, and Moral Panic***

Outside of literary works, honour politics is also evident in public discourse. Durham (2015) observes the way in which rape stories in the media in India often carry the theme of national shame. Mangat (2022) also points out the way in which the sexual assault of Dalit women is used to negotiate honour.

The moral panic that is created is an exercise in symbolic violence, in that women are called upon to defend communal honour through self-regulation.

Literature reveals the process through which symbolic violence is exercised by dramatising the consequences of honour politics. The feminist re-reading of honour politics argues that the

way to subvert honour politics is to move the moral economy away from purity and reputation and towards autonomy and justice.

### **7. CONCLUSION: Toward Feminist Deconstruction of Honour**

As discussed in this study, this paper has demonstrated that shame and honour are technologies of gendered control in Indian narratives. It has attempted to go beyond respectability and conceptualise honour politics as a moral economy of symbolic violence in the regulation of female sexuality.

In its analysis of Roy, Bama, Kapur, and Dalit feminist discourse, this article has sought to show that honour politics in India works in a manner that traverses caste hierarchies in uneven ways, always positioning women as the guardians of communal legitimacy. Female sexuality is a source of collective anxiety. Shame internalises discipline.

Feminist literary criticism has to engage with honour as a political category. Gender justice cannot be achieved without a challenge to moral economies that equate women's bodies with social prestige. Literature offers a space for a critique of honour and a thinking of alternative moral economies of autonomy rather than purity. In its focus on shame as a technology of structural governance, this article has attempted to extend Indian feminist discourse in a way that engages more deeply with symbolic violence and cultural discipline.

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