

A Critical Lens to Understand Gender and Caste Politics of Rural Maharashtra, India

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Abstract

'*Sairat*', is a highly acclaimed movie and is the highest grossing Marathi film till date. It was one of the biggest hits of the Marathi films industry and screened for many months in theaters after the release. '*Sairat*', a Marathi romantic drama film portrays the construction of hegemonic masculinity and its relation to the controlling of women's sexuality. The movie centers around controlling women's sexuality, portraying dominant masculinity and brutal killing due to transgression of caste (in the form of inter-caste marriage) in rural Maharashtra.

In July 2016, an upper caste girl was raped and murdered by lower castes at Kopardi village soon after the release of the movie. The rape and murder of the girl led to protests all over Maharashtra. The protesters and leaders of the upper caste community alleged that the rape and murder of a girl was provoked by the movie, '*Sairat*'. This article takes the protests as a provocation to take a closer look at *Sairat*'s gender and caste politics.

This article explores the way hegemonic masculine identity has been manifested through control over women's sexuality and their mobility, and violence against women. The hegemonic masculinity has been constructed based on unequal gender and power relations between men and women, dominant and lower caste men.

Keywords

Film, gender, caste, sexuality, femininity, masculinity

Introduction

In July 2016, after the rape and murder of a young upper caste girl in Kopardi village, Maharashtra, political leaders from various parties asked for the critically acclaimed

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Marathi movie '*Sairat*' to be banned. '*Sairat*', directed by Nagraj Manjule, depicts the love story between Archie (leading female character), who hails from a dominant caste family, and Parshya (leading male character), a boy from a Denotified Tribe. The movie was one of the biggest hits of the Marathi film industry and was screened in theaters for many months after its release. Following the case of the sexual assault of the young girl in Kopardi, individuals from a high caste community started protesting against '*Sairat*', claiming that the movie was responsible for encouraging Dalits to desire and marry upper caste girls (Deshpande, 2016). According to the protesters, the movie was also harmful because it showed dominant castes in bad light (Joshi, 2016). The article tries to delve into, how *Sairat's* representation of the upper caste community led to protests against the film. What do the protests themselves reveal about the upper caste community?

This article takes the protests as a provocation for a closer look at *Sairat's* gender and caste politics. Most critiques of the movie have focused on the inter-caste relationship at the heart of the film. However, scant attention has been paid to how the movie depicts hegemonic masculinity and femininity in the context of the caste society of rural Maharashtra. This article examines how *Sairat* portrays the violence of hegemonic masculinity, depicting how it significantly rests on the regulation of women belonging to the community. The article argues that the movie highlights how the construction of the dominant caste identity rests on unequal gender roles and power relations, manifesting as control over the sexuality and mobility of women. In addition to its depiction of an inter-caste love story, the film's depiction of gender roles also contributed to the backlash it faced from the dominant caste community.

Research Methodology

The article is based on a review and analysis of the portrayal of dominant masculinity in a Marathi movie, '*Sairat*'. Relevant literatures were searched through by using the keywords, *Caste, Gender, Sexuality, Femininity, Movie, Masculinity* in electronic bibliographic databases such as *Jstor*, and *EPW*, Newspapers, magazines, and other web portals were also reviewed to prepare the article.

Literature Review

'*Sairat*' is situated in a longer tradition of Indian movies that use the heterosexual love story as a backdrop to discuss other social issues. According to Virdi (2003, p. 181), "These kinds of films assert the individual's rights against feudal structures associated with vested familial interest: the authority of the father, the state, and the unwritten rules of endogamy with caste, class and community". What makes '*Sairat*' distinct from other films of the genre was the way in which it highlighted caste. '*Sairat*' brought the focus back on caste issues at a time when caste is increasingly being constructed as irrelevant within discourses of law and by the upper caste Hindu society.

Dr Ambedkar (1918) rightly points out in his book *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*, that endogamy is central to the caste. The mechanism of caste is nothing but the mechanism of endogamy (Ambedkar, 1918). By keeping an inter-caste heterosexual love story at the center of the film, *Sairat* highlights how the regulation of women's sexuality is the key to maintaining caste endogamy. Through its portrayal of the leading character Archana (Archie), the movie offers a nuanced understanding of the intersection of caste and gender identities, by depicting how women might use their caste location to exercise agency, express sexual freedom, and to resist socially constructed femininity. However, the movie suggests that any exercise of such agency and freedom is ultimately limited in the context of a caste patriarchal society where the violence of dominant caste masculinity reigns supreme.

'Sairat' and its Portrayal of Dominant Castes

Archie is the daughter of a sugar baron and local leader and is depicted as a bold and confident girl. Archie also belongs to one of the high castes. In the context of rural Maharashtra, upper castes occupy a dominant position, holding control over land, politics, educational institutions, sugar factories and other cooperative sectors. In the movie, Archie's father attempts to construct his family as a modern and progressive one, claiming that upper caste families like theirs don't restrict their daughters from enjoying various kinds of freedom. In the movie, Archie draws power from her dominant caste status and as the daughter of a politician and a landowner, to enjoy freedoms such as riding bikes and tractors, roaming in the village, and going to the well for swimming. She is shown as having access to many things without any restrictions. Archie is also seen riding a heavy bike, Royal Enfield and tractor, heavy vehicles associated with masculine strength and power. She is also seen to be teasing and bullying the local boys. Her boldness rests primarily on her dominant caste identity, and presumably offers a different ideal of femininity from the ones commonly seen in Indian movies. Archie's subversive femininity can also be seen in her relationship with Parshya. Unlike usual depictions of heterosexual romance, Archie falls in love with Parshya not because of his aggressive masculinity but because he is handsome, intelligent, and gentle.

However, the movie compels the viewer to question such an understanding of dominant caste femininity as progressive and liberated. Even as Archie is seen as occupying different spaces, she was under the surveillance of men from her families as her brother was continuously checking her movements. The control becomes most violent at the moment Archie expresses romantic and sexual desire. She falls in love with Parshya in the movie, who hails from the Pardhi community, a Denotified Tribe. Once her family learns about her relationship, Archie comes to be prominently marked as carrying the honour of the family. As a way of ensuring caste endogamy, her marriage is decided within her own caste against her wishes. It is not just her marriage that restricts her autonomy; Archie is also denied the other freedoms which she used to have access to earlier. '*Sairat*' thus demonstrates how the safeguarding of

caste structure is achieved through the highly restricted movement of women or even through female seclusion (Chakravarty, 1993).

A close reading of this movie demonstrates the exceptionality of Archie's bold and confident femininity. Her friend, Swapnali, probably from the same caste of Archie, but not with the political and economic clout that Archie's family has, remains passive in the movie. Even Archie's mother remains passive, in keeping with her role as the ideal high caste housewife. She is not seen anywhere with her husband in public spaces or at political meetings. Swapnali and Archie's mother can be considered as more representative of hegemonic caste women of rural Maharashtra. Through the characters of Swapnali and Archie's mother, '*Sairat*' challenges dominant castes claim to progressive gender relations, showing how the caste identity is dependent on controlling its women's sexuality, maintenance of patriarchal structures and power relations often mediated through land ownership (Gawali, 2017).

Through '*Sairat*', we see how the power and privileges of dominant caste communities rest on an aggressive masculinity that seeks to control both women of all castes and men of oppressed castes. The violence of hegemonic masculinity is reiterated at various points in the film. Both Archie's father and brother, Prince, are shown to be angry, aggressive, and entitled hegemonic men. Archie's father and brother enjoy a high degree of impunity in their village not only because of their wealth but because of their dominant caste position, highlighted through the connections that they have with the police and those in the government bureaucracy. Their wealth and clout make them the rulers in the village. After knowing about Archie and Parshya's love affair, Archie's brother thrashes the lower caste boys and drives their families away. Within the context shown in '*Sairat*', hegemonic upper caste masculinity exists in such a way that even if the threat to life is not overtly visible against the "lower" caste groups, a small indication of the threat becomes enough to drive a lower caste family away from their own village.

The movie also shows how the power of the dominant caste communities is perpetuated by passing on these norms of aggressive masculinity from one generation to the other. Prince does not think twice before slapping his teacher who hails from an oppressed caste (marginalized) community. His act of violence is normalised and justified by his father and his community. Instead of condemning the son's violent behaviour, Archie's father encourages it. He explains to the teacher how he should obey rather than punishing his son, and he does not stop there but also has the teacher transferred to another place. In doing so, Archie's father ensures that the generation imbibes the norms of aggressive upper caste masculinity, carrying forward the caste and patriarchal legacy of the high caste community.

'*Sairat*' offers a critical perspective on the norms of femininity and masculinity within the dominant caste communities present in rural Maharashtra. However, as Connell (2005) argues, there is not one masculinity, but many different masculinities, each associated with different positions of power. Masculinity emerges at the intersection of caste, religion, class, sexuality, gender, and other identities. '*Sairat*' highlights how norms of masculinity and femininity are shaped by the caste relations

of particular contexts. We see this in the changing relationship between Parshya and Archie. Archie's dominant caste status is well-known to those in her village and thus, she is able to tease Parshya while the two of them live in the village. As discussed earlier, such a relationship between Parshya and Archie can be seen as subverting hegemonic norms of femininity and masculinity. However, once Parshya and Archie elope to Hyderabad, there is an instance of Parshya slapping Archie. Such an act would be unthinkable in the village where Archie's dominant caste family exerts pervasive power. However, on first moving to Hyderabad, both Parshya and Archie retain a sense of anonymity. The temporary sense of anonymity allows their caste status to be irrelevant, which enables Parshya to subvert the norms of masculinity and femininity associated with their caste, and thus slaps Archie. This subversion is only temporary; the violence of dominant caste masculinity is restored when Archie's brother murders both Archie and Parshya for their transgression of endogamy. Thus, the movie demonstrates the pervasive violence of dominant caste masculinity.

Protests against 'Sairat' by the Dominant Castes

'*Sairat*' was released in April 2016, and it became the biggest hit in the Marathi film industry. For many months, the movie was screened in theaters. Few months after the movie's release, in July 2016 in the village of Kopardi, the police accused Dalit men of the gangrape of an upper caste girl. Within a short time, the incident was taken up by the media and it was broadcast across Maharashtra. Soon, people started protesting against the incident across Maharashtra (Sinha, 2017). While the sexual assault of the upper caste girl was seen as the immediate trigger behind the protests, the protests soon became an instrument for the upper castes to reclaim their caste dignity and pride. A key feature of the protests was the anger of dominant castes against the director of '*Sairat*', Nagraj Manjule. According to the protesters, '*Sairat*' was responsible for encouraging Dalits to desire and marry upper caste girls. They claimed that incidents of lower caste men harassing upper caste women had increased after the release of the movie.

Another significant feature of the protests was the claim by protesters that the movie's depiction of the dominant caste community was inaccurate (Tare, 2016). Interestingly, the very nature of the protests raises questions about the gender relations within the community. It needs to be noted that as part of the protests against the incident at Kopardi, upper castes organised more than fifty marches. However, every single one of these marches was a silent march. Given that dominant caste men have in the past organized loud and violent protests, what explains the choice of silent protests in this instance? It is worth noting that what differentiated the protests against the Kopardi incident from previous protests was the presence of upper caste women at the forefront of the protests. The Kopardi protest was among the first time that dominant caste women were out in public protests (Aasbe, 2019). The presence of the women at the forefront of the protests might be read as an instance of women claiming

leadership roles. However, the choice of the silent protest as a tactic complicates this understanding.

To take the presence of dominant caste women as protesters in the public sphere as an indication of their empowerment also ignores the terms that defined their presence. As discussed, the protests against the Kopardi incident were among the first instances that dominant caste women had occupied the public sphere as protesters. These women have rarely protested issues of gender-based and sexual violence that exists in their communities. Women who were part of the protests against the Kopardi incident too did not raise concern about patriarchy that exists within their own communities. Instead, their protests were aimed at protecting the diminishing caste privileges of their brothers and fathers. In doing so, they prioritized the pride and honor of their community over the issues of gender-based and sexual violence that they experience on an everyday basis. Thus, any understanding of how dominant caste women were pushed into leadership roles during the protests against the Kopardi incident must take into account how these women were active participants in protecting their community's masculine interests.

The protesters' reading of '*Sairat*' and their protest against the movie also reveal the gender relations that are characteristic to the upper caste community. Dominant caste men claimed that the movie portrays the Dominant caste community in the wrong way.¹ The question this provokes is whether the opposition of the upper caste men was against the aggressive and violent dominant masculinity depicted in the movie or against the sexual agency displayed by Archie, a higher caste woman. Hence, it can be argued that the dominant caste protests against '*Sairat*' must be understood in terms of their opposition to the character of Archie since she is shown as an upper caste woman who asserts her sexual rights. Not only does Archie challenge the rules of caste endogamy by going against her family and choosing Parshya as her partner, but she expresses her sexuality in a way that transgresses the norms of appropriate femininity and sexuality expected from upper caste women. The norms of caste and patriarchy within dominant castes dictate that women's sexuality should always be seen as a private matter and any discussion of sexuality by women, if at all, be expressed within the closed walls of the house. Upper caste women talking about sexuality in public would be seen as challenging the dominance of the men of their community. In *Sairat*, Archie flirts with Parshya in public spaces and in doing so, she asserts her sexual rights in the public domain. Archie not only asserts her sexuality but she does so openly and outside the wall of her house. Her choices challenge the norms of sexuality and femininity considered appropriate for upper caste women, and hence, she faces extreme violence within the movie as a way of restoring the honour of the hegemonic caste community.

Conversely, the presence of upper caste women as protesters in the public sphere in the Kopardi incident was accepted and glorified by the community. It needs to be noted that the women protesters were silent on the matter of their rights as women.

¹Refer <https://www.loksatta.com/manoranjan-news/sairat-movie-insulting-maratha-community-in-maharashtra-says-nitish-rane-1243852/>

No woman protested against the violence meted out to Archie by dominant caste men in the movie or argued that women like Archie should have agency and freedom. The acceptance of the women protesters within the dominant caste community reveals that the community provides space for women to appear in the public sphere. In doing so, they perhaps seek to highlight the progressiveness of the dominant caste community, much like Archie's father's initial claims in 'Sairat'. However, the protests reveal that dominant caste women's political participation is allowed only when women are complicit in maintaining caste patriarchy and caste hegemony. Any public assertion of sexual rights would pose a challenge to hegemonic masculinity. Hence, we see the relative absence of protests led by women against the forms of gender-based-and-sexual violence that they face from men within their community.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the movie 'Sairat' and the responses to 'Sairat' reveal the norms of masculinity and femininity within the dominant caste community. While the caste community makes claims to progressiveness based on the limited space offered to women in the public domain, it is evident that the presence of women in public is contingent on upholding caste pride and the dominance of hegemonic masculinity. As 'Sairat' reveals, the source of power and privilege of the dominant caste community rests on an aggressive and violent masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity assumes responsibility for controlling the sexuality of women and punishing transgressions of caste privileges and caste endogamy. It is in this context that the protests against the sexual violence at Kopardi must be understood as upholding the hegemony of the upper caste community, rather than as protesting gender-based and sexual violence.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Sujatha Subramanian, a Ph.D research scholar at The Ohio State University, USA for her support and feedback in the formulation of the article.

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