

CALIBAN'S FOLLY



Though not ranked among the most enduring protagonists from Shakespeare's plays, Caliban is undoubtedly one of the most thought-provoking characters he has created. Half-human, half-beast, he is the sole inhabitant of an island about to be colonized by the white men using magic (an equivalent of the 21st-century technology). He is both a rebel and a villain, innocent and malevolent. Caliban opposes Prospero, the deposed Duke of Milan, who has taken refuge on the island. He wants to defend the sovereignty of the island that he sees as his territory. To the reader in the post-colonial age, this aspect of the character is appealing; he appears to be a noble savage, resolute in his defiance. But there is another side to him. Prospero regrets that though he 'lodged thee in my own cell, till thou didst seek to violate the honour of my child'. Faced with the accusation, the islander is neither evasive nor apologetic. He is rather brusque, boastful about his attempt to rape the princess who, typical of the civilizing agents, tried to educate him. Turning to Prospero, the foul-mouthed, semi-human creature brags, 'Thou didst prevent me, I had peopled else this isle with Calibans.'

These words, to my mind, capture the whole range of issues and concerns surrounding rape – its emotional, cultural and political implications. At one level, violation of a woman is an act of releasing a hurt, humiliated man's repressed anger against a superior, more powerful opponent, or a system. To the primitive pagan, the white man is a colonizer from the civilized world, out to subjugate the island with his magic. The absence of remorse in him for his attempt to assault the princess is uncannily reminiscent of Nirbhaya's rapists. Lodged in Tihar jail, Mukesh Singh, one of the accused, now sentenced to death, told Leslee Udwin of BBC in an interview that the victim should not have resisted or fought back.

In a society, guided by civilizational norms and values of gender equality, sexual assaults on women should not happen in the first place. But they happen – not just in India but everywhere else. Nearly one in five women – 22 million – in the United States has been sexually abused at some point in her life, according to statistics quoted by the California Coalition Against Sexual Assault. Every two minutes somewhere in that country a woman is raped. Roughly 85,000 women are raped every year in England and Wales. And only 15 per cent of them decide to report the crime to the police. This evil seems to be atmospheric, not specific to a particular culture or geographical territory. Women are assaulted both internally and physically because of the demonic notion of patriarchal superiority – a man, because of his sense of social entitlement, thinks he can

sexually assault a woman. For him, she ceases to be human – a mere object, a lump of pulsating flesh.

As media reports pour in about the victims of the big and mighty, there are no longer any holy cows – presidents, prime ministers, movie moguls, business leaders, media personalities are all in the row of the accused. If one takes into account the quantum of assaults by one half of humanity on the other around the world – in conflict situations, normal times, within the four walls of family, at the workplace, in public spaces – it assumes the proportions of a World War. New laws are being enacted and the system sensitized to cope with the avalanche of cases reported from many levels of the professional sphere. The old world perceived to be led by men feels threatened as women are out there entering newer spaces to vie for their place, often breaking the glass ceiling. However, no records have been kept of the wreckage that millions of women carry within them for the rest of their lives unable as they are to wipe out the memory of the ghoulish moment. No technology is available to measure the slow burn inside every such troubled female frame. As a 15-year-old athlete suffering from a fractured spine, Megan Halicek went to Dr Larry Nassar, doctor for the US gymnastics team. Instead of telling her the truth that she would never recover, he went on sexually abusing her. ‘I closed my eyes tight, I held my breath, and I wanted to puke,’ Halicek said testifying in court recently. She was not alone. About a hundred women athletes came forward to tell the stories hidden inside them for so many years. The courtroom was awash with raw emotions. The former athletes, many of them household names at the prime of their career winning golds for their country, have moved on in life, no longer chasing big dreams of setting the tracks on fire. Many of them burst out crying while testifying. The abuses they suffered still fester. Luckily, reassuringly Nassar will be spending the rest of his life behind bars.

The memory of sexual abuse, more than physical torture or damage, rankles, making it difficult for the victim to forget, turn the page forever. Very often the offender goes unpunished leaving the victims and their families distraught, emotionally wrecked forever. The claustrophobia around the issue of the guilty not being brought to book, brings back the searing story of Patty Berglund. Daughter of a well-known Democrat couple, she is a gifted basketball player. At 17, she is raped at a party by a young man, the son of her parents’ influential friends. Her mother dissuades her from registering a case against the offender. Years later, by then her own children have grown up, Patty meets Joyce, her mother, old and ailing. She brings up the old issue dusting it off from the past. It’s an intense moment in *Freedom*, Jonathan Franzen’s 2010 novel. For Joyce it’s the moment of truth. The mother and daughter face each other, one aggrieved, the other accused, the past coming back to haunt them.

Patty’s angst, her sense of betrayal by her mother gives me a disquieting feeling every time I read about instances of old abuses surfacing, pushing away layers of dust and cobweb. In the writing of the masters of the Indian subcontinent the theme acquires an altogether different dimension – the victim as a rebel, resplendent in her defiance. Saadat Hasan Manto’s *Khol Do* is an exposition of depravity in humans in trying situations. Sirajuddin, home-less like millions of other Indians

during Partition, approaches a group of social workers to make a search for his missing daughter Sakina. When the young men find the lost girl, instead of taking her to her father, they betray their beastliness by raping her. At the end, Sakina lies in the doctor's clinic, her salwar pulled down – she is actually waiting for another assault. Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* is perhaps a sharper stab at a system sustained by patriarchy. A young tribal woman who has joined an ultra-left militant group, is finally caught by the soldiers detailed in the forested area. Raped repeatedly by the men in uniform, she refuses to wear any clothes in the lock-up. Her way of protesting against the system. The irony of her name – *Draupadi* ('Dopdi' in her tongue) – is inescapable. There was divine intervention to save the honour of the princess, but none to cover the nakedness of the disinherited tribal woman.

Sexual violence most certainly scars a soul much deeper and more indelibly than physical injuries. If a large number of women across cultures have no choice but to live the remains of their lives with the ghosts from the past chasing them, that certainly gives the world an unequal basis. ■

Bhaskar Roy