Media and Intersectionality: A Case Study of Media Representation of Identity Politics in Kashmir

Madhubanti Mitra[1]

Abstract

Across the world, identity politics in terms of recognizing and defining multiple identities, their interrelations and contradictions, started in the early 20th century. The immaculate manifestation of multiple identities and their correlation is the result of various anti-imperialist struggles in the global scenario.

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, Intersectionality is an umbrella word that implies the interconnected nature of multiple identities i.e., social categorizations viz. class, race, religion and gender as applicable to particular individuals or units of the society. Intersectionality does not only refer to the social system where these overlapping and interdependent identities prevail, but also talks about their contradictions and the nature of discrimination and oppression closely connected to the identity groups they belong to.

Even after 30 years of its inception, the concept has demonstrated scopes for growth and debate in regard to its application to different country, race, religion, gender and class. This case study aims at finding plausible methods to read, comprehend and deploy the intersectionality debate in analysing the identity politics in Kashmir in context of the Kathua rape case.

Key Words: Intersectionality, Intersectional Identity, Media Representation, Identity Politics

[1] Faculty, Mass Communication, St. Xavier's University, Kolkata, madhubanti.mitra7@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Kimberle Crenshaw introduced the theory of "intersectionality" in her 1989 article- "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." Her theory aimed to capture the compounded form of oppression experienced by American women simultaneously owing to their racial and gender identity. She argues that this form of oppression has not been explored by traditional anti-subordination frameworks.

Taking a lead from this theory, the concept of intersectionality has been investigated in the Indian context by the scholars and other academic organizations in terms of feminist theories, disability rights, anti-caste approach and queer rights. The earlier discourse and debates encompassing intersectionality argued whether application of intersectionality in the academic arena in India is only a 'single-axis framework' (Menon, 2015) or the it provides substantial grounds to study qualitatively different experiences and discards the redundancy of intersectionality as an analytical concept (John, 2015).

In India, through the history, the states situated along the North and North-Eastern borders of the country have particularly experienced gradual and constant construction and deconstruction of identities, therefore resulting in varying nature of oppression. Such oppression is often viewed with the same popular social, political and academic approach in studying oppression experiences in general. Ironically, such viewing, even though termed as equal and justified by many, leaves the scope of argument that oppression experience of marginal identity and its subsequent representation is always qualitatively different.

Historically, the oppression experiences of marginal identity have been uniquely varying in nature and such experiences should be analysed in the context of multiple oppressive identities. Intersectionality is a conceptual framework that could provide an analytical premise to substantiate the dissimilarity associated with marginal oppression experience in the context of multiple overlapping identities. Additionally, the representation of intersectional identities in popular media contents is coloured by social evils like stereotyping and intolerance. Such an approach is bound to trivialize the experience of oppression that an experience group carrying intersectional identities face in everyday life and therefore often subjugates a forced identity.

2. Identification of Problem

Popular media platforms construct and deconstruct popular identity narratives. Most of the times social evils like stereotyping and intolerance tampers the identity narrative in the collective conscious. This case study highlights the fact that the correlation between oppression experience and the construction of identity is vaguely denoted in case of popular media narratives. Rather, the media representation of the oppression experience of intersectional identity suffers from a bias which ironically constructs a subjugated identity narrative of the oppressed in the collective conscious.

3. Research Question

Can intersectionality approach be used to analyse the media representation of the Kathua rape case to provide an academic framework to study the oppression experience of the different and overlapping marginal identity units in India?

4. Methodology

This research is basically a case study of the Kathua Rape case and its media representation. The data used in this research is secondary data and the method used in media content analysis. This research analyses media contents related to the case (print, online and television) of a particular time period (January 2018 to June 2018) to highlight the presence and absence of the report on this case and present a qualitative analysis of the media contents which adheres to the research objectives. Many existing social theories, i.e., Hegelian approach of civil society and gender theories i.e. Judith Butler's theories on gender trouble contributed to shape the ground of this research.

5. Literature Review

The politics of rape in India goes way beyond the notion of lust. It, in fact, is the tool used in most cases of classic power politics signifying the suppression of a particular gender. However, the oppression experience of the rape cases in India could be analysed from the considering the identities associated with the victim rather than looking at the incident in isolation. According to Indian author Gurmeher Kaur, "The act of rape is about imposing power and flexing muscle to show dominance, over the other gender, over the other

community or over the other person" (Chopra, 2018). The Kathua rape case is a perfect example of such imposition of power over a victim belonging to several overlapping marginal identities, i.e., intersectional identities. A Muslim nomadic Bakarwal villager from Kashmir, the Kathua victim faced unimaginable barbarism and what makes it even more unique is that the details of such barbarism were published in media along with the victim's real name and photograph. To add to this, the coverage in media and the protests in favour of the victim also took almost three months (IQBAL, Asifa- Victim of Inidia's failed secular democracy, 2018) which makes it a case that could question this delay in terms of the intersectionality approach. Hence the general appropriation of looking at this case as just an issue of humanity is definitely unjustified. What develop the scope for this research even more are the false binaries drawn by the media contents available on this case. The perpetuation of rape in terms of gendered violence only and the generalization of this case despite the significant role of identity politics in this case is one of the most important attributes to be commented on. While popular online media like shethepeople.tv questions the 'politicization' of the case (Chopra, 2018) despite the unapparent presence of intersectional identity politics in this case, other online media platforms like National Herald, India questions this denial and discourse of victim defending. (Jamwal, 2018)

6. An Analysis of Media Representation of Kathua Rape Case in the Context of Intersectionality

The Kathua rape case, a heinous incident of rape and murder of an 8-year old minor girl, the resident of Rasana, a village in Kathua district of Indian-administered Kashmir, came to focus in January 2018 and got featured in several media platforms. This study aims towards analysing these media representations and tries to depict the correlation between oppression experience and identity of the victim in context of intersectionality.

6.1 Beyond gender identities

While we look at such media representations, it is imperative to acknowledge the fact that reporting of gender based violence in popular media cannot be studied in isolation as it is directly associated with how women are covered in popular media in general. The gender lens of popular journalism is male-centric and biased against women ([GMMP], 2015) and assuming such gender roles propagates the notion of vulnerability in case of gender relation. As a result, coverage of violence against women falls prey to various reporting evils like

sensationalizing, reducing the complexities, power politics and identity politics related to the issue to a mere conflict between two individuals and actively representing unusual news angles to 'sell the story'. (Meyers, 1997)

Such denials lead to more oppressive approaches while reporting a case of violence where an individual assuming multiple marginal identities is involved. The overlap of such marginal identities and how it is connected to their oppression experience and its subsequent qualitatively different reception in the collective conscious can be explained with the help of intersectionality. It can be safely concluded that intersectional identities and their oppression experiences are reported in a way that unfolds alternative degrees of discrimination and constructs alternative identity based on such discrimination. For example, in case of the Kathua rape incident, the victim became the 'girl whose identity was revealed' rather than becoming the victim of a heinous crime.

6.2 Delay in Reporting and Unfolding of Identity

According to feminist scholar Judith Butler, recognition of lives depends on certain set of societal norms that operate to automatically recognize some lives instantly than the others. (Butler, 2016). If we look closely at the coverage and of Kathua rape case, we can clearly see that the reporting of the case begin to surface only in April 2018 while the rape and murder of the victim occurred in January. In fact, the first report missing report was filed on 12th January, 2018. The national media coverage of the victim's death has been clearly delayed for 3 months as opposed to the immediacy of other such cases. Not many people questioned this delay because the victim's other intersectional identities- Kashmiri, economically backward, religious minority and belonging to the lower caste nomadic community- gains her less prominence in the collective conscious.

What also makes a solid premise of argument is the placement of this coverage. The repeated rape of a minor girl for almost a week and subsequent murder should ideally make first page news. However, a prominent newspaper like Times of India spared only a column to report such an important case. (Newslaundry, April 2018)

This complex identity politics extends to other aspects of media representation of this case as the media focused on the gruesome details of the incident as well as took no measure to protect the identity of the victim. The ethical premise of identity disclosure of a rape victim is another debate, but the sheer indifference and negligence of nation-wide media houses towards the protection of identity of a raped minor is proof that the coverage was biased. The intersectionality debate can be the perfect analytical framework in this context to suggest that

even though gendered violence and its reporting has always borne imprints of outlook of oppression, the nature of oppression faced by an intersectional individual is qualitatively different in a negative way.

Major media houses circulated the photograph of the victim, the name of the victim and later on used the picture of her abused body to incite public sympathy, something that will be helpful to sell the story. Such sensitization of a heinous crime on a minor is not only unethical, but also it can even facilitate the crime itself on several layers. One of the most suggestive consequences of this irresponsible reporting is that the victim's name surfaced as one of the top searches in the popular pornographic websites. It is imperative to take note of the fact that the revelation of photograph, name and identity majorly contributed to the case taking such unfortunate turn. It is an offense punishable by law to reveal identity or photograph of a rape survivor and such identification of even a deceased victim merely individualizes the issue rather than addressing the rape culture as a whole (Paul, May, 2018). Such insensible take on the rape of an 8-year-old-minor is not only condemnable, but at the same time it can be noted that such callousness around the identity revelation during the media coverage is one of the firsts in many years in case of rape coverage.

6.3 Discourse of Victim Blaming and Defending the Culprits

In most of the rape coverage, the gender role of a woman is defined in isolation. However, homogenizing the oppression experience under the representation of victimhood only suggests that the other identities of the oppressed are not recognized. In the process, the dominant factor that controls the magnitude of the oppression experience, intersectional identity, gets glossed over by the analysis of the victim's character and other non-significant factors. (Paul, May, 2018)

The Kathua rape case is unique in the area of victim blaming because owing to the various marginal identities that the deceased girl belonged to there were major adversities in the acceptance of the incident. So much so that it also made a large number of the population question the credibility of the incident. The discourse of culprit defending was as prominent in this case as was the justice pleas for her. In February 2018, a right wing organization called 'Hindu Ekta Manch' organized a rally supported by local people with the agenda of protesting against the arrest of one of the accused. These protesters waved the national flag in the rally and tried to negate the link of the accused with this incident. Even then, there was hardly any coverage of the incident in the national media. (Ahmad, 2018)

Such demands in the rally also undermine the power politics of different layers which

can be recognized through intersectional framework. The rallies are rather supported by a unidirectional narrative of victim blaming where the sympathizers of the accused relied on the discourse of balancing demographic identities. This case is unprecedented as the accused and his side claimed that a particular community is being targeted in the process and hence implied their alleged victimhood seeking to transfer the case to CBI. The people defending the accused misused the concept of presumption of innocence without any proper grounds that cite any irresponsibility in the investigation. (Jamwal, 2018) This arbitrary approach gained local support only because of the identity politics and it subjected the rape victim bearing intersectional identities to face the brunt of it only because it is easy in the relevant socio-political narrative of India, especially Kashmir, to successfully get away with such a victim blaming sham.

6.4 General appropriation of the case beyond the political implications

The Kathua rape case was manipulated by plethora of political strings being pulled at the same time. Even after the crime was committed, the case was attempted to be kept out of public knowledge because of the sheer political involvement. Even then, a primary element of media representation of the Kathua rape case is that the national media argued against politicizing the rape. This case has always gone through the general appropriation of the incident on the basis of humanitarian grounds only. However, such an incident cannot be analysed in isolation. The argument of keeping the politics and the incident of the rape is futile because rape itself is a product of power politics. The Kathua rape was pre-planned and it has strong political grounds. (IQBAL, 2018) The hatred vested in the political history of Kashmir and the always developing identity politics of the place contributed to the construction of the victim's identity premise that set a target on the poor girl. This is a purely political premise which cannot be looked at devoid of political conjectures.

6.5 Unauthentic speculations on national media platform

Taking cue from the earlier point mentioned in the study, the discourse of victim blaming reached its peak as a popular Hindi mainstream newspaper called 'Dainik Jagaran' claimed in one of its E-paper stories that the Kathua victim was not raped at all. (Quint, 2018) Such an outrageous claimed backed by another bizarre claim that there were more than one post-mortem report hit the internet. (Iyer, 2018) A newspaper with a readership of over 50 million people making such insensitive claims about a deceased, minor rape victim is pathetic and irresponsible. Moreover, Sunday Guardian Live also wrote an article on its opinion

section under the claims of 'a fake news' trying to prove the article to be a product of fragments of imagination while using real names and identities related to the case and making conjectures about the incident without any responsible sourcing. (Venkataramakrishnan, 2018)

Even in case of electronic media, similar activities can be observed. Zee news, a leading television news channel in India, on one of their sensationalized programs allegedly revealed some 'big truth' vindicating one of the accused rapists on fragile grounds (News, 2018). Such misleading reporting while the legal trial was in progress is definitely an irresponsible act on the part of the national media.

The Kathua case is a prominent example of using rape as a political tool. It signifies the oppression experience of people carrying overlapping marginal identities. How intersectionality works in the socio-political background of India can be analysed through the layers of power politics and media representation biases. The media representation of Kathua rape case has been equated with the infamous Delhi rape case of 2012, calling the victim 'the new Nirbhaya' and such innuendo tries to mislead the masses to reading this incident as a seamless repetition of rape only based on the gender roles of the parties involved. (Pant, 2018)

Contrary to this populist narrative, this incident was a perfect example of nation-state politics playing a dominant role in the affirmation of the rape culture. The structural violence that Kashmir has been facing for decades, the sentiments of nationalism, the majoritarian politics of Jammu and Kashmir that the intersectional communities face the brunt of are very clearly played out in this incident. However, the constant efforts by the media of drawing parallel with other rape cases and referring the case as along the themes of 'India's daughter' and 'Not in my name' denies the premise of structural oppression which can be analysed with intersectionality. Even in the reports where they have attempted to hint at the identity politics, the premise of argument is really vague as the victim has been portrayed just as a 'tribal Kashmiri Muslim individual' removing the political history of oppression of the Bakarwal community. (Mannathukkaren, 2018).

To conclude this case study analysis, it is imperative to draw attention to the fact that simple binaries of power politics cannot do justice to the oppression experience of intersentional individuals. The populist narrative of media representation of such oppression experience often looks at such experiences in isolation with a biased lens which negates the correlation of identity politics with such oppression. However, it is important to analyse the intersectional identities to identify the real instigator behind the oppression experience of these individuals. This way the biases of irresponsible media representation can be invalidated

academically to create the framework for an alternative identity narrative of marginal individuals. In India, such non-binary understanding can be developed collectively by using intersectionality as a multi-directional framework.

7. Proposed Solution

The ethics and discipline that journalism should vouch for should revolve around some basic grounds of morality. Independent reporting, prioritizing accuracy over sensationalism, shunning bias and assuming accountability are some extremely important guideline that media as the fourth pillar of democracy should follow. (GMMP, 2015) The discourses of oppression coverage in media should be rights-oriented, so that these essentially bring out the social injustice in a fair manner.

A rights-based approach of journalism can standardize the recognition of the stakeholders in an incident and highlights the duties and rights of everyone involved. This approach makes sure that the vulnerability of the intersectional identity group is highlighted and brought to the public conscious. Potentially historicizing a story of oppression provides a better premise to analyse the oppression narrative of certain identity groups. Also, such acknowledgements in a rights-based approach will majorly contribute in identifying and combating the root causes of oppression. (Fraser, 1995)

Hence following a well-crafted international guideline on gender-ethical media representation of intersectional oppression experiences (OWR, 2015) can change the scenario with a positive outcome. Major suggestions from such guidelines include reporting the social context of gendered violence to create an ethical premise of analysing the oppression experience of marginalized individuals. Thus, the appropriation of violence narratives can be omitted and it can be achieved majorly by using proper terminology and correct language. The language used to describe a particular event does impact majorly how the incident is going to be interpreted. Moreover, the rights-based approach of journalism can be used to discard victim-blaming completely. This discourse of discarding victim-blaming should start at refusing to offer or accept excuses for violence committed by men. The media definitely need to be pragmatic about selection of source while reporting a particular case of violence or oppression. It is imperative for the reporter to understand the authenticity of the source contributes to the general reception of the story.

8. Conclusion

Along with the proposed measures it is also important for the media to educate the mass to look at a story with the angles of diversity, even if such approach is not derived from the populist identity narrative. The media representation of certain cases must discourage the imposition of the cultural values of a single community on others. This unwanted imposition can be smoothly avoided if media can go beyond the stereotypical representation of race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status. (Paul, May, 2018). This suggestion leads to the point that this paper has been striving to arrive on that the overlapping of these identities are related to their oppression experience and the reception of intersectionality can only be facilitated by media's active participation in discarding any analysis of oppression in isolation apart from intersectional identities.

The intersectionality framework can be an appropriate analytical tool to interpret this correlation between identity narratives and oppression experience. Places like Kashmir which are situated in the borders have developed a structural oppression narrative at the background of their socio-political history. It is also important for the media to highlight the historical implications while reporting such cases of oppression experience rather than having a generalized approach inspired by populist narrative. Thus, intersectionality can provide an easy analytical framework for understanding qualitatively different oppression experience and creating an alternative, non-stereotypical, political identity narrative.

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