

Gender, Perception and Punishment in Anupama Chandrasekhar's Free Outgoing

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Abstract

In India, a young girl's sexuality is a matter of public concern due to the fact that globalisation and technological advancements have altered female identities and roles and prepared the way for new perceptions of female identity, particularly in terms of their sexual assertiveness. Free Outgoing calls draw attention to and reveal a multitude of ideological conflicts around gender and sexuality that have been redefined by the internet and smart phones. Based on an actual classroom MMS event involving a young girl, "The MMS Scandal," as it was termed, opened Pandora's box in terms of the young girl's life, sexuality, upbringing, and morality, which became debatable within her family, political organisations, and more so in the media. It only took one click for the entire nation to despise her and be prepared to punish her.

Keywords: Women Theatre, Gender, Perception, Identity, Role of Technology.

Anupama Chandrasekhar is an Indian dramatist who was born and currently resides in Chennai. She spent most of her childhood in the city of Chennai, which is located on India's eastern coast, right in the middle of the Bay of Bengal. She has worked briefly as a journalist for the Hindu Business Line. She did not begin writing for the stage until the latter half of the previous decade, when one of her early plays, Closer Apart, was staged in her birthplace, and when her next play, Acid, which she directed herself, was staged in Mumbai.

Anupama Chandrasekhar's play, "Disconnect," which she wrote after attending a writer's workshop at the International Playwrights Programme at the Royal Court Theatre, has garnered a lot of praise from critics. Over the course of more than a decade, the Genesis Foundation has provided financial backing for this programme, which aims to teach creative writers from around the world how to write for the stage of a professional theatre. During their time spent working in India, the Royal Court Theatre's International Department made the remarkable discovery of Anupama Chandrasekhar. She was a young journalist at the time, but she always had dreams of becoming a playwright. In the year 2000, she participated for the first time in the International Residency for Young Playwrights, which was held at the Royal Court Theatre in London. After that, she continued to work on a play with the department. In an interview given to Deepa Punjabi in 2015, she recounts her journey as a writer and shares her thoughts on the experience in the following words:

“Anupama Chandrashekar (AC): The Writer's Bloc has been a major turning point in my life. The workshops provided me a safe environment to experiment and to fail I learnt the craft of rewriting there. In 2005, four writers were invited from the workshop to spend a week at the Royal Court Theatre, London, to work on the beginnings of a new play. I took with me a germ of an idea that eventually

became FREE OUTGOING. It took two years and dozens of drafts for me to find my voice with the play. The play opened in 2007- and was a big success, much to my surprise. It was the first Indian play that the theatre had staged. A year later, FREE OUTGOING was given a main stage revival and it travelled to the Traverse for the Edinburgh Fringe.

Between 2016 and 2017, she held the position of first international playwright-in-residence at the National Theatre in London. Her plays have been produced at some of the most prestigious theatres in India, Europe, Canada, and the United States of America.

Her first play, "Free Outgoing," was what brought her to the attention of the British public. It was directed by Indhu Rubasingham in 2007 upstairs at the Royal Court, and it documented the physical and psychological crisis for a single mother living in an Indian society when it was discovered that her daughter had a sex tape sent with viral ramifications as a text message into the internet. The play revolved around the mother forced to deal with the situation after discovering out that her daughter had done this. At the time, all it took was just one text message for a girl to garner the hatred of an entire nation. The play chronicled, with elegance, and objectivity, the moral implications of her family's attempts to cope with the situation in a measured way that was pertinent to the situation.

In 2004, a male student at Delhi Public School, R.K. Puram, named Hemant Chugh, who was a minor, took a video on his phone of a female student performing oral sex on him while she was topless. It seemed like she wasn't aware of what she was doing. The blurry video clip was then sent to other people through MMS, and porn sites were filled with it. This event caused panic all over the country, and a lot of news outlets covered it. The event's discussions revealed the inefficiency of and necessity to revise the IT Act of 2000. After this scandal, and partly because of debates about who is responsible for what on the internet and how it can be prosecuted, important IT rules were made, such as making it illegal to use cell phones on college and school campuses across India. Four Hindi films were based on or inspired by the 2004 MMS scandal: Dev.D (2009), Love Sex Aur Dhokha (2010), Ragini MMS (2011), and I Don't Luv U (2013).

The play Free Outgoing, is a one Act play, divided into nine scenes that portrays a collision between the cutting-edge technology of the contemporary world and the ingrained traditionalism of Indian culture. The mentality of the Indian subcontinent is shown not through eyes of compassion or remorse, but as that of a nation crushed between the fast-changing world of today with advances in technology and ethical conservatism, compassion or remorse, but as that of a nation crushed between the fast-changing world of today with advances in technology and ethical conservatism. The plot of the play entirely revolves around the repercussions that occur after a video clip of sexual activity taking place between two kids at a school becomes a huge topic of discussion on the internet. Chandrasekhar does an excellent job of demonstrating the problematic areas of penetration of smartphone use around the world, including cyber bullying and cyber stalking. Abuse of teenage girls has relocated its focus from school campuses to internet gaffes that reach hundreds or more friends, family, and neighbours—in fact, the entire nation—at one time with the click of a button. The play raises themes such as how to deal with new technology that violates societal values, and it does so in a horrible way.

Malini, a middle-class woman who has been widowed, is the protagonist of this play. She discovers that her daughter Deepa, who is 15 years old, has been caught on camera engaging in sexual activity with a boy at the school that she attends. The video clip sent to a friend goes viral in no time, being distributed

all around the world via the internet. Overnight, Malini, Deepa, and her brother were the targets of the media and the general public and victims of the mob that gathered outside the apartment. Anupama Chandrasekhar has investigated the effects that a real-life occurrence has had on a group of people, including members of the affected family as well as their friends. The purpose of this study is to make an attempt to analyse the dual standards that are widespread in Indian society when it comes to matters pertaining to the exercise of sexual freedom by females, despite the fact that men and women are equal partners. The ultimate blame is heaped on women, while males are exonerated.

In an interview with Edward Hower Anupama said "I am exploring conflicting Indian views about female sexuality (The Hindu 20 March 2011).

In her discussion of the western impact, she made the observation that she believes western media is contributing to the process of altering the boundaries of contemporary people's private life. She uses the example of the American television comedy Friends, which was a show that a lot of people watched. It tells the story of a group of young adults who are focused on their careers and who, after becoming disconnected from their families, form a new kind of free-floating extended family among themselves. They do this by candidly discussing the specifics of their private lives with one another and by occasionally having trysts with one another. She goes on to suggest that there is absolutely possibilities for young Indians to identify with Friends, which is an institution that she calls "Friends." In days gone by, women who violated traditional morals were either put to death by being buried alive or by being executed by stone.

In today's world, however, such women are the fixation of the media, which in turn undermines the tarnished image of a family. The play's central focus is on the subject of how an individual's right to privacy can be safeguarded against the intrusion of the media. If there is any way to prevent the malicious use of the internet to smear the reputations of innocent young women, please do so. The drama does not offer any explanations as to why Deepa behaved inappropriately in a sexual manner. Surprisingly, Deepa's character does not appear on stage once for the entirety of the performance of the play. Deepa's personality is paradoxically one of freedom and outgoingness.

The play does not present any means of preventing the malicious use of the Internet to destroy the reputations of young females. Why Deepa behaved inappropriately in a sexual manner is not explained in the play. Surprisingly, Deepa's character never appears on stage during the course of the play's performance. Even the author places restrictions on Deepa's free-spirited, outgoing personality, which is odd given her normally unrestrained nature. Her mother has shut the door and confined her to the room. The author attempts to conceal Deepa's psychological situation by denying her a role in the drama. It is probable that the playwright intended for the audience to draw their own conclusions regarding the undefined social norms prevalent in Indian society. The characters' outlook on life is pretty reflective of the real world.

Malini is the 38-year-old mother of Sharan and Deepa. She works part-time as a saleswoman for metal polish and is a certified public accountant. Deepa is one year younger than her sixteen-year-old brother, Sharan, who is presently enrolled in the eleventh grade. She is motivated to pursue a medical career. Jeevan is a close friend of Sharan and frequently hosts group study sessions at Sharon's residence. On one occasion, Deepa arrives home late with the explanation that she had to get her bicycle repaired. The next day, Nirmala, the principal, visits Malini's home and insists she is not there for a social visit.

Nirmala inquires as to whether Deepa's behaviour is odd in any way. It is difficult for the principal to address the incident that occurred between Deepa and Jeevan on Tuesday evening at 7:00 p.m. in the English room after school hours. Malini finds it difficult to accept the news because she is aware that her daughter has an excellent academic record and was the class's top student and winner of the national essay contest. Deepa's mother would never imagine that such a talented and success-driven young woman could be so careless. Sharan, who is in his teens, exhibits behaviours that can be defined as impulsive and emotional. As the project nears completion, he senses increasing frustration. Malini approaches the problem humorously by arguing that today's youth take every tiny issue excessively seriously and exaggerate it by a factor of one hundred. He is bothered by the idea that he, Deepa, and Jeevan were expelled from school together.

They even investigate potential causes, such as the educational pressure that students face in school and the kinds of foods that children consume. He believes it to be a case of nymphomania. He claims that a psychologist who appeared on a television show stated that Indian adolescents are becoming more active at an extremely young age. The reason behind this is that they are moving away from serving *Thayir Sadam* (curd rice) and toward serving pizza. Additionally, he believes that coffee has aphrodisiac properties. Sharan loses patience with their conversation and looks at Ramesh with a blank expression. The fact that he discovered the video clip of Deepa's incident on Ramesh's mobile phone upsets him, and he criticises Ramesh for having watched it despite the fact that he had insisted of being their friend.

The attention of the media has been drawn to the incident, and they have approached Malini about giving an interview. Stones are hurled through a window in the building, and even women show up with brooms.

Chandrasekhar provides a depiction of the hype in the media as:

KOKILA. ...But this is more than a mistake. The women and their broomsticks...political parties are getting involved now. This afternoon, people paraded her effigy on a donkey. Actually, all of your effigies. Even yours. (To SHARAN.) I saw it all on TV. My manni(sister-in-law)called from Delhi last night and asked why I have allowed disreputable people inside the colony. I didn't know what to say to her! We can't show our faces outside the colony anymore.(39)

At last the family comes out in the open to face the media, and to issue an apology live on a news channel on T.V.

MALINI: (Clears her throat.) I humbly request all the people who have gathered at my gates to rest assured that we are proud to be Tamils. I have tried to teach my children the importance of Tamil values and of staying within the bounds of the society we live in. I, as her mother, take full responsibility for my failure to ensure that my daughter understood the consequences of transgression. I request all the people to kindly disperse and allow the normal passage of life. The residents of Shakti Complex should not have to suffer for the indiscretion of my daughter. Thank you for your patience and time.

Pause.

USHA. Back to Vinay in the studio. When we return, more on the MMS issue. (Pause. Then to MALINI.) Well done! You were great! SHARAN runs towards MALINI.

The issue of MMS scandal finds an interesting take in Nishikant Kamat directed *Drishyam*, a 2015 Hindi criminal thriller. It remakes 2013 Malayalam film *Drishyam*. Orphan Vijay Salgaonkar and Nandini have two children, Anju, a class twelve student, and Anu, a sixth-grader.

A disguised cell phone camera catches Anju showering at a nature camp. Meera Deshmukh's son, Sameer "Sam" Deshmukh, is the perpetrator. Sam blackmails Anju for sexual favours one night, arriving at her house with Nandini, her daughter informed. Nandini begs Sam to leave their family alone, but Sam won't erase the video unless his sexual demand is met. Nandini begs him to leave Anju alone, and Sam agrees if she has sex with him. Anju lunges at Sam with a lead pipe to break the mobile phone, but she hits him in the head, killing him. Nandini tells Vijay who comes up with a plan to protect his family.

Conclusion

The pervasive presence of smart phones and social media platforms has created entirely new pathways for shaming and bullying people about their sexualities and gender identities, particularly among young women and Trans, gender nonconforming, and queer populations. Numerous instances of non-consensual sharing of images of other people's bodies and even documentations of sexual assault have gone viral. These behaviours also referred to as "cyber bullying" or "slut-shaming," have led to social and familial issues and even death. Answering to a question Deepa Punjabi, on international favourable response to *Free Outgoing* Anupama Chandrasekher says:

DP: Why do you think British audiences responded so favourably to *FREE OUTGOING*?

AC: My friend, the British director Indhu Rubasingham, often tells me, that the more specific the writing, the more universal it gets. I was initially surprised that an essentially Tamil play could find so much global acceptance. But then, I've been told, the western world is not so different from India as we imagine

British parents face the same issues of teen sexuality as we do Women are objectified there in much the same way as here. There's as much misuse of technology there as here Last year, when the play opened in Toronto, Canada was reeling from the suicide of two teen girls, whose rape was filmed and shared online and via cellphones. *FREE OUTGOING* became particularly timely and relevant there.

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