Decoding 'Daarosh': Resisting a Regressive Custom Suppressing Women's Voice and Violating Her Right

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Abstract— *This Paper is an attempt to decode the tribal custom prevalent in Himachal Pradesh called Darosh which means forcible marriage where the boy kidnaps the girl of his choice without her consent and establishes a physical relationship with her during that night after which the relationship is formally accepted and recognised as a marriage. This has been depicted in the story called Darosh authored by SR Harnot. The story revolves around the sister of the victim of this ritual who also resists all attempts on her kidnapping. The story gives a glimpse into the custom, delving into the complexities and the hidden circuits of mutual cooperation among the families of the groom and bride and exposes the hypocrisy of society in accepting such marriages that directly encroach on the girl's right to choose a life partner. It also depicts the strong resistance that the patriarchal system faces from the modern educated women of today.*
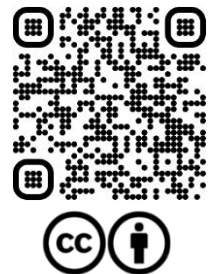
Keywords— *Darosh, forcible marriage, groom and bride, hypocrisy of society.*

In India, we have heard of the women who have been given the right to choose their husbands following the tradition of Svyamvaras (a custom electing a groom of one's choice from several prospective grooms present in one hall together) which was a celebration of liberty of the women. The woman has been a subject of interest for men who have desired to possess them as wives or as mistresses. We have often heard stories of the elopement of a princess with her prince charming, exercising her right to choose her own partner. The concept of arranged marriages in modern times also ensures the girls' approval of the groom. However, there have been instances in history where girls have often been kidnapped, by admirers who wish to marry them against the girl's will.

Marriage is an institution where a man and a woman take vows for life to fulfil the promises made to each other and revolve around the sacred fire seven times that is believed to bind the couple for the next seven births. The three rituals of Kanyadaan, Panigrahana, and Saptapadi mean gifting the daughter away by the father, voluntarily holding hands near the fire to signify impending union, and taking seven rotations around the fire with each circle signifying one of the seven marital vows. The importance of the mutual consent of the bride and groom and their families is pertinent to be understood to get the true essence of the Indian concept of marriage.

The paper is an attempt to analyse the story 'Daarosh' which is a prevalent custom in the Kinnaur area of Himachal Pradesh, one of the mountainous regions and states of India, and that completely defies the religious norms and sanctity of the custom of marriage. The story, written by SR Harnot, a prominent writer in India, revolves around the protagonist Kaanam, a young girl who resists the kidnapping attempted on her that would have ultimately led to her forcibly being married to the boy who was interested in marrying her. Kaanam's resistance against custom is also accentuated by the fact that her real sister was a victim of this ritual that curbed her choice of choosing a life partner. Kaanam, is an educated girl, who was sent to the city by her parents to pursue her studies. Darosh is a custom that perpetuates patriarchal dominance in the region where the women are forced into a relationship for a life that is not approved and consented to by them.

It is a word used in the tribal regions of Himachal Pradesh and means 'forcibly'.

> It denotes a marriage in which a girl is abducted, raped and forcibly married to her rapist. 'Daarosh Dablab' – 'forced marriage'. It is recognized in the tribal region as a valid marriage and social taboos prevent the girl or her family from resistance. (Nandrajog,112)

Ironically, Kaanam has been sent to the city for higher education by her parents, allowing her to pursue her studies, but have deprived her of the right to choose her life partner. Her father shows displeasure at her returning back to the village as they fear that she would be noticed by the boys of the village who are of marriageable age.

> It was dusk when Kaanam's bus reached the village. Some people, who had boarded the bus from nearby stations, looked at that unknown girl with surprise. A few boys had also tried to tease her but Kaanam sat there as if she didn't know anything. (Harnot 68)

Therefore, they would rather want her to lead a life in the mainstream and not be confined to the traditional ways of the village. Once in the village, her parents too are bound by social obligations that would not refrain them from helping her adopt the liberal life and resist the regressive customs. Kanam's sister had been a victim of this custom that completely encroached upon her right to choose a husband of her own choice. The parents of the girl remained silent spectators to this conventional method of marriage much to Kanam's displeasure. However, when another similar incident takes place in the village, the girl's parents decide to lodge a complaint with the authorities concerned. Kanam supports the parents and even brought the girl to her home which further blew the controversy out of proportion regarding the whole idea of defying a tradition and all the more showing solidarity with the girl.

> Bade Pita was furious when he saw Kaanam bring the girl home with
>
> her. He came to know that she is the same girl who had defied tradition.
>
> He said nothing to Kaanam but quarrelled with Ma in front of her. Ma did
>
> not say anything. The matter began to be discussed far and wide. Also, the
>
> girl belonged to a lower caste community. A storm swirled up in the
>
> house. Everyone began to question Kaanam's Bade Pita about it when he

ventured out of the house. Till now nobody had ever dared to say anything

> to him. But now he had lost all respect, and that too on account of his own
>
> daughter. He felt like breaking Kaanam's limbs. She was his misfortune.
>
> But still, he never dared to look his daughter in the eye and talk it out with
>
> her. Kaanam had tried to speak with him several times but she did not
>
> succeed. (Harnot 72)

Such was the attitude of the family towards Kanam who seemed to have been inviting trouble for the family by resisting the customary system of marriage. The village community looked down upon Kanam's father who became the eye of the storm as it is the father's responsibility to keep the daughter in his control. The girl is virtually considered incapable of deciding or voicing her opinion on any conventional practice that is followed purely under the prerogative of the men of the society.

Consequently, Kanam herself was targeted by the boys of the village who tried to kidnap her with the intention of forcibly subjecting her to marriage. However, things didn't work out as planned for the boys who failed to kidnap Kanam. They were taken aback by Kanam who promptly resisted their attempt to get hold of her and even retaliated strongly. Not anticipating such an aggressive reaction from Kanam, who beat them hard. The other boys ran away, leaving the boy who wanted to marry Kanam, alone. The boy who wanted to marry her lay here like a fallen pillar, deprived and drained of all strength and energy.

> Kaanam was fighting with the boys. She held the boy who had first touched her by the scruff of his neck. Nobody knew how she flung him several feet away. Half-dead, he tried to get up many times but fell back again. Kaanam spat towards him from afar. Before the others could be reduced to the same condition, they fled in the Maruti car. Now, he lay there all alone. If the other women had not stopped her, Kaanam might even have killed him. (Harnot 73)

This act displays the dominant and waywardly style of the boys who were used to following their own will without any questioning or facing any kind of resistance. A democratic way of life seemed to be an alien concept for these boys who had no regrets in pursuing the orthodox conventions contrary to the modern rules of a civilized world. A girl's wish was not considered important that relegates their status to that of an inferior being. The decision-making abilities of the women are also in question

here as the custom violates the very fundamental right of her freedom and liberty of making a choice.

Kaanam's feat was talked about in the whole region which further embarrassed her father. She was now looked upon as a burden by her family as they thought that she brought disgrace to them and unnecessarily landed them in a controversial situation. Her father said: -

"You hussy! Do you know what you have done? I am the Pradhan of the area. How am I to face the people? They'll spit on me. Ill-gotten wretch, why didn't you die the moment you were born?" (Harnot 74)

Kaanam defended her retaliation passionately justifying how this was done to save her honour by reacting to the boy's attempt at kidnapping and raping her to which her father replied by revealing that the whole fiasco was in fact planned by him and the father of the boy jointly to arrange a wedding for Kaanam. This showed the hypocritical stance of the father who tried to get rid of his own daughter by forming a nexus with the boy's father for abduction and marriage.

"Honour ... did you have any that it has been saved today? Still, I did my duty as a father. You would have been married into a good family .... To the son of the MLA. Do you know that?" (Harnot 74)

This writer exposes the duality of the society where the parents themselves allow such customary rituals to take place that saves their money on the wedding and also reinforce their belief in the traditional system of forced marriage. The girls feel neglected and ignored by such an attitude of the parents themselves who consider them as a burden and want to get rid of them and their liability by allowing boys to kidnap them. These customs can also be attributed to the sexual control that men want to exert on the women of society. They ensure a kind of restriction on the women that forbids them to roam around freely, an assumed sign that she seems to invite and intimidate the men to chase her and eventually establish a physical relationship with her. This biased and gendered attitude towards women depicts the patriarchal mindset of men.

Ultimately, Kaanam emerges victorious in uniting the girls against this regressive system of marriage and its eventual aftermath that kills the girls' freedom and binds them into marital and familial obligations. The girls were now no longer willing to follow this traditional system and saw in Kaanam a ray of hope that would show them the path to pull them out of the darkness and a bleak future. The girls united against this socially and politically by urging Kaanam to file the nomination for the upcoming election against the boy's father who was the Member of the Legislative Assembly of their area. This act can, be seen as total defiance against the system that thrives on patriarchy and also as a direct challenge to the established hierarchy in the society that can be changed with women's participation in the political process. Kaanam's assertion to be a stakeholder in the decision-making of the society and as an authority to reckon with the male leadership is a strong step towards a complete social overhaul and switch.

The story questions the property rights of the daughters as well where the girls are allowed to be kidnapped, which is considered to be an elopement of a kind. This forced elopement and the ritual to accept this one-sided affair as an act of marriage is another way of evading the daughters from asserting any right to property. This absence of any formal marriage ritual saves the money of the daughter's parents who would have to spend money on the wedding ceremonies. In the patriarchal society, girls are deprived of any rights and the parents spend money neither on their education nor on their wedding. However, the protagonist has been able to bring about the necessary changes in society by gaining education and bringing awareness among the other girls of the village.

Thus, we can conclude that the present generation of the villages who have been educated and joined mainstream society has escaped the regressive customary system of marriage that deprives them of their fundamental rights as a human and as a woman. Migration has enabled them to lead normal lives but more peculiarly to challenge the regional patriarchal dominance that is non-existent and irrelevant to the world on the other side of these mountains.

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