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## INSULATED AND SUFFOCATING LIFE OF A NEGLECTED WIFE

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**Abstract:** "The husband should give his wife her conjugal rights and likewise the wife to her husband"

Corinthians 7 Verse 3 (English Standard Version)

Denial of conjugal rights is a big issue and the situation is prevalent in all age groups and this includes both younger couples and older men and women. If men is denied, he seeks gratification elsewhere and that goes unnoticed. If women is denied, and seeks gratification elsewhere to either men or women how are women treated? If she seeks gratification from men, she is tagged prostitute, if women, she is tagged lesbian.

Sexual health is defined in the draft Programme as: "the integration of somatic, emotional, intellectual and social aspects of sexual being, in ways that are positively enriching and that enhance personality, communication and love." My paper focuses on movies *Fire* by Deepa Mehta and *Astitva* by Mahesh Manjrekar on these aspects.

**Keywords:** conjugal rights, homosexuality, heterosexual.

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**Introduction:** Denial of Conjugal rights for woman is such an essentialist issues that one cannot self-censor in expressing it despite the possible repercussions from so called patriarchal society, of delving into personal experience or divulging secrets through writing.

Apart from food, shelter and clothing, sex is also a basic need for human survival. But married couples deny each other this precious gift. It is the women who are mostly affected as several of them have been approaching the courts in a bid to bring back the husband to the matrimonial bed.

While there are many reasons why couples deny each other conjugal rights, the first to be always proffered is infidelity. Having an extra-marital affair can make one lose interest in their partners since that takes away the affection. There are also couples who fight then go for months without having sex.

Many other reasons why couples deny each other their conjugal rights have been proffered namely stress, depression, low self-esteem, alcohol or drug use, lack of sleep, medication, erectile dysfunction, hormone imbalance, menopause, health conditions, relationship trouble, lack of time.

In such cases, after all what is said and done which is important for couples is, to freely discuss their sexual relationship and seek ways to help each other. Failure to be open about sex has seen many husbands and wives seeking gratification elsewhere. It is really injustice to deny ones partner their conjugal rights, especially without explaining the reasons. This is why even God put it on record that denying each

other conjugal rights is a bad habit. "The husband should give his wife her conjugal rights and likewise the wife to her husband" – 1 Corinthians 7 verse 3 (English Standard Version)

What should a woman do if her husband never cared or respected her desires? What should a woman do if she needs satisfaction of her physical desires and her husband turns her down? Should she keep waiting for her husband to turn sympathetic to her and oblige her or should she beg on her knees to her husband to oblige her in satisfying her physical needs? Is it that only 'the' men have such desires and not women? Or is it that woman has fewer desires than 'the' man? Such direct questions really create turmoil in our mind and we cannot agree more on the stance taken by the protagonists of the movies *Fire* and *Astitva*. Denial of conjugal rights, unable to repress their emotions the women characters in the movie have sought gratification elsewhere. In the movie *Fire*(1) we find erotic relationship between woman (homosexual) and in *Astitva*(2) between man and woman (heterosexual).

*Fire* is the movie which targets the traditional role of Indian women that demand submissive role and to quietly bow to the fate and husband. Radha and Sita, the daughter-in-laws of the same family, frustrated by marriage, find solace in each other. Radha (Shabana Azmi) and Ashok (Kulbushan Kharbanda) have been enduring a dry and barren marriage for 15 years ("Sorry, no eggs in ovary," the doctor explains.). Ashok, a middle-aged celibate spends most of his money and time on a guru who

teaches that sexual desire is evil, a belief he puts into practice by engaging in cruel bedroom rituals with Radha lying next to her without touching in order to resist temptation. Ashok's brother Jatin (Jaaved Jaffri) marries Sita (Nandita Das), but he continues to have an extra-marital relationship with his Chinese girlfriend.

Sita's arrival brings a modern sensibility into this moribund group who exerted towards a long-overdue collapse. She refuses to live by standards other than her own, and her relationship to Radha slowly goes from fellow victim to lover. Sita and Radha see more clearly: Their lives have been made empty, pointless and frustrating by husbands who see them as breeding stock or unpaid employees. Radha is drawn out of her shell by Sita and the two find solace in each other what their husbands refuse to give.

*Fire*, seems to be part of a new freedom in films from the subcontinent caused much heartburn during its first screening at the International Film Festival of India in Thiruvananthapuram in January. It is made in the sort of gentle sexuality that is often more erotic than explicit, because it allows us to watch the story without becoming distracted by the documentary details. Many men expressed shock at the behaviour portrayed.(3) And despite all the issues of gender and marriage it raised, it became infamous as a "lesbian" film.(4)

This choice made by them is because of insulating and suffocating life bestowed on them by their husbands who has least idea about their wives physical needs and happiness. The fact is that one cannot have everything in one's life. Happiness does not fall into our lap; in fact, happiness is too ephemeral a word.

*Aditi (Tabu)*, is a quintessential middle class wife in the movie *Astitva*, a bold film with adultery. Her husband, an ambitious male chauvinist, Shrikant Pandit, although not a brute or a wife-beater, treats her as a chattel, sets dos and don'ts for her. Her role is confined to kitchen affairs and the upbringing of the kid. While Shrikant has one-night-stands with other woman and the only times when he showers his love on his wife is when he needs to satiate his sexual desire. And Aditi, like an ideal *Bhartiya patni* takes it all stoically.

Aditi is bequeathed (in the form of a will) the belongings of a long forgotten musician friend (Mohnish Behl). Shrikant gets suspicious and flips back through the pages of the diary he regularly

writes, he comes up with a shocking conclusion that he could not have conceived their son.

Without even a bit of consideration and regards for all the dedication and devotion to him in 27 years of their marriage, Shrikant shower with verbal torments on Aditi mercilessly for her infidelity while at the same time turning blind-eye towards his own libertine affairs.

Tired of her dull and uninteresting existence, unable to take it anymore Aditi gives in and walks away from marriage, her household, her family in search of herself. It is the beginning of a new life, the opening of a new chapter and the dawn of a new day after a dark and horrifying night to find her identity.

It is unfortunate to note that if a male have an extra-marital affair, it is a sign of manhood; if a female does the same is a sign of weakness or treated slut. The man should be the bread-winner of the family; there is no need for woman to work. A man should be able to have sex whenever he wants to regardless of whether his wife is willing or not. The above chauvinist statements may seem outrageous but it is pathetic to note that many men all over the world believe them to be true. And it is the above notions that the Mahesh Manjrekar attacks with a powerful punch in his movie, *Astitva*.

The basic issue of marital relationship and existential quench of a woman forces us to make an honest look at our own relationships with the opposite sex. It subtly touches the need of "communication" in understanding the sensitivity and each other's needs and wants - lack of which is the result found in both the movies: *Fire* and *Astitva*.

My personal acquaintance with two women(5) who are also the victims of the conjugal denial is shared to show whether their issue has been resolved or not. Both are highly qualified and are working women but childless. The first friend of mine Manyata married for 6 years does not have compatibility with her husband because of ego clashes, outcome of which is hostility. She thought through legal intervention she could bring her husband to matrimonial bed. But everything blew out of proportion. The estrangement further deepened and finally led to divorce.

Second friend of mine, Prabha, who bear the brunt of conjugal denial, has stood by stoically overcoming the drab existence by diverting her mind in acquiring knowledge and progressing in her profession, continuing to remain with the same partner, who is unemployed, playing the role of a husband herself,

taking care of all his requirements. Her better-half is a good human being only that he lacks libido because of his bitter past of losing his first wife and baby during delivery, his mother of heart attack and a big loss in business. He finds solace with his second wife. Though he has denied the conjugal rights she has no qualms. She has patiently endured and no regrets. Her conscience is clear devoid of any such indulgence that could make her feel guilty.

It is a human nature to feel wanted and desired, especially by those whom we are romantically involved with. So what happens when a woman is not getting enough? If a partner denies for various reasons as portrayed in the movies like *Fire* and *Astitva*, can lead a woman to feel undesired and unloved and sexual frustration is likely to open up a towards a lot of temptations.

Aditi and Radha were not content with platonic bliss but they did not see sex as a big enough reason to throw their family into disarray at the beginning. In these circumstances, the outlet of their urge was to seek out of their marriage. In the case of Aditi, to her music master (heterosexual), and Radha to her own co-sister finding homo-erotic space. To cheat on her significant other made Aditi live with the guilt, and stayed feeling trapped and stressed because the outcome was the baby. While Radha did enjoy the homo-social and homo-erotic space with Sita who were indulged in homoeroticism as an outlet for frustrated heterosexual desires.

Their male-chauvinistic husbands, instead of being sympathetic and understanding, they shunned the wives for their infidelity. This was absolutely an emotional abuse which unknowingly and callously perpetrated on their wives. These ladies didn't want to be the oppressed section of the Indian social order. They left behind their husband's house to seek their own identity.

Perhaps the only way out of this situation for the ladies mentioned in this paper was getting to the root of the issue. Talking with their men about it and finding a way out. But this was not that easy for the fact that sex itself is inhibited topic that one can feel awkward to discuss and complaint. What if he refuses to talk about or to get help?

The law acknowledges that one of the duties of a spouse is to have sex with their partner. Willful denial of sex by a spouse or refusal to actively participate in it without a reasonable cause is mental cruelty and grounds for divorce permissible under

law. Under the Matrimonial Causes Act, women in sexless but salvageable marriages can seek the intervention of the court to be given an order for the restitution of conjugal rights. If the courts do not find any reason why this decree should not be granted, they will grant it. But the courts are keen not to infringe on the rights of each party. For instance, if a man is withholding sex because either he or she has health issues, then a court cannot give an order for the restitution of conjugal rights.

While the courts may not be able to force one person to have sex with another, if a man is given this order but still refuses to grant the wife her conjugal rights, he will be required to periodically pay sums of money to his wife. At this point, this can be grounds for divorce. This is what has happened to my friend, Manyata.

No doubt, a healthy sexual relationship is a basic ingredient of a happy marriage. Women share this point of view that if we are not having sex with our significant other, we are missing a vital connection. Yet many of them are living in almost sexless relationships. In fact, many husbands fail to understand that they are at risk for being compelled by the courts to service their wives if they should take the legal route to force their husbands to have sex with them.

On a personal level and in the real world, though, things are different. Women, it turns out, are willing to sacrifice their physical satisfaction for a man who provides. For instance, the incidence of the second friend of mine, Prabha, believes that no doubt, sex is a vital component of a marriage. For her, it serves many more purposes than pleasure. According to her, a lack of it is enough to bring a marriage to an end depends on the circumstances surrounding it.

Her man's disinterest in sex is caused by medical issues, but she is happy with the other forms of physical affection from him like hugging and cuddling. She wouldn't have survived a lifetime with a husband who was not the least bit interested in her sexually. She feels it is not good to pressurize the husband because sex should have an emotional connection and if he was just fulfilling his duties, then it would be mechanical. He has to actually want to do it, not have to put up with it. Her inclination towards spirituality made resist her sexual urge. Living happily with the same partner. She is wonderfully surging in her profession towards progress. I feel she is the really an empowered,

enlightened and self respecting yet humble woman who sets dauntlessly on the path of establishing her own identity.

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3. Astitva, a 2000 bi-lingual film in Hindi and Marathi was directed by Mahesh Manjrekar.
4. Deepa Mehta didn't mind. "What *Fire* has done is that it has started a dialogue among the men and women. That is what I want as a film-maker," she says.
5. Aanchal Singh, Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women; Human Rights International Research Journal : ISSN 2320-6942 Volume 1 Issue 1 (2013), Pg 245-249
6. In an interview, Deepa said, "I have no idea why they have labeled it a lesbian film. May be because people like to talk about sex. I don't know. Lesbianism has become the simplest way to raise a discussion about the film. I just don't care now. I used to care a lot, because *Fire* is not a film about lesbians. But now they can talk about any aspect of the film. I just don't care ....."
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