

Beyond Victimhood: Unflinching Representation of Rape and Psychological Revenge in Fire

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Abstract

Rape remains one of the most silenced and traumatic forms of violence against women, often accompanied by social stigma, victim blaming, and secondary victimization. Literary representations of rape frequently avoid direct engagement with the survivor's lived experience, reducing the act to a narrative device rather than a central concern. Sithara S's short story *Fire*, from the collection *Agniyum Kathakalum*, stands apart for its unflinching and graphic portrayal of gang rape and its exploration of an unconventional mode of revenge adopted by the survivor.

This article examines how *Fire* presents rape not merely as physical violation but as a profound assault on bodily autonomy, dignity, and identity. Through the character of Priya, the narrative foregrounds the psychological trauma of sexual violence while simultaneously challenging conventional expectations of victimhood. Instead of seeking legal redress or social validation, Priya chooses a form of psychological retaliation that destabilizes the perpetrators' sense of masculinity and power. Her calculated emotional dominance transforms the power dynamics of the assault, rendering the perpetrators emotionally vulnerable and powerless.

By portraying Priya's resistance through psychological strength rather than physical force, *Fire* redefines revenge and survival from a feminist perspective. The story critiques patriarchal notions of masculinity, exposes the commodification of the female body, and interrogates societal responses to sexual violence. Ultimately, the article argues that *Fire* offers a radical reimagining of female resilience, where emotional agency becomes both a means of survival and a form of justice.

Keywords: Rape, sexual abuse, trauma, masculinity, revenge, female resilience, Sithara S, Fire

Article

Rape is a widespread global issue. It is difficult to pin down an exact number, as its rate varies across countries and many cases go unreported. The UN estimates that around 1 in 3 women globally experience physical or sexual violence, largely by an intimate partner. In India, one rape is reported roughly every 15-16 minutes, yet it is said that many cases go unreported due to fear, shame, victim blaming, and lack of support systems etc.

Rape is a traumatic experience that affects the survivor physically, psychologically and sociologically. It can result in physical injuries like bruises, cuts, STI's, HIV and in some cases, pregnancy. Psychological impacts include anxiety, stress, fear, depression, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), nightmares and suicidal tendencies etc. Sociological impacts include secondary victimization. Survivors have to go through police investigations, interviews, medical examination and so on. And in several cultures, rape

victims are considered as "damaged". This leads to social ostracization. Victim blaming is another major problem faced by survivors which often leads to self blame, isolation and suicidal thoughts.

The process of recovering from a rape differs from person to person due to individual reasons. The nature of the attack, availability of support systems, how survivors choose to cope with their trauma, and social influences all impact the healing process. The healing process requires patience and persistence. In addition, meditation, yoga, exercise, and socialization may also provide relief for survivors.

Sithara S is a Malayali writer whose stories articulate her anxieties about the injustices suffered by women. Bold and uncompromising in their tone and tenor, most of her stories have sexuality as a central theme, the intricacies of which she explores without inhibition. Her short story collections include *Agniyum Kathakalum*, *Veshapakarcha*, *Nrittasaala* and *Edam*.

Fire, a story taken from the collection *Agniyum Kathakalum* is an unusual story that presents sexuality and man- woman relationship from a new perspective. The story is a critique of the subjugation and commodification of the female body. The story deals with issues related to gang rape, verbal and physical assault, humiliation, revenge and the issue of masculinity. In the story, the protagonist Priya, does not allow herself to be psychologically and emotionally ravaged after being gang raped. But she prefers instead to remain nonchalant in her relationship with the assaulters.

Sexual assault and rape are topics met with avoidance and discomfort. Like society, authors seldom take on the subject of rape directly. Rape becomes one of several go-to devices, an option to sort out a troubled character's backstory, introduce a worthy difficulty to overcome, or provide evidence of an antagonist's evil nature. In that sense, the *Fire* is a story in which the author provides a detailed account of the gang rape, that Priya has gone through. Through the unflinching portrayal, the author tries to bring the reader's attention to the helplessness and the thoughts that pass through the victim's mind while being raped. The author presents clearly, the pain of the victim, when her body, which she believed that it belonged to her alone, is claimed by three men.

The story deals with violence, trauma, and the resilience of women. It follows Priya, a typist, who one evening cycles home late and must pass through a dark, narrow lane that represents fear and danger. In this lane, she is brutally gang-raped by three men—Sanjeev, a telephone booth owner; Ravi, whom she had previously confronted for bad behavior; and a young unnamed boy. "Every movement they made was regular and precise. One held her struggling body down while the other clamped her mouth shut. And the third started to remove the clothes from her body in great haste, his hands working like machines" (105). From these lines it is clear that the attack was pre-planned. It is mentioned in the story that Ravi had been following her like a shadow, for a while. When she was being raped by one after the other, she felt that her body was tearing apart and that she was the 'most dispossessed woman on earth'. Even though she thought that they would hesitate seeing a sanitary pad inside, they removed it too. Painfully it is said that "someone had established a claim even on her menstrual blood, which she thought of as only hers"(106).

Both Sanjeev and Ravi had been harsh towards her. They had a kind of arrogance in their movements. Before Ravi's turn, he even slapped her face hard, as an act of revenge. The third one was an unfamiliar boy with barely sprouted moustache. Later in the story, it is said that he is apologizes and telling Priya that he was trapped into their company. He was nervous and guilty and therefore his was an incomplete domination. In her semiconscious state she saw the three of them moving away in their motor bikes.

She feels that her body has become a sewer for sweat, tears and a lot of other filth. She manages to get up and grabs the scattered clothes. Fighting the pain, she lifts her bicycle and slowly rides home. She is

not late when she reached home, and her mother and sister are engaged in their daily activities. Neither did they notice her nor does she told them anything. She chooses to fight her grief alone, silently. She suppressed her tears, bathed twice, and slowly falls asleep.

Her emotional strength is noticeable when she decided to go to office as usual.

Priya does not collapse or act like a helpless victim. She bears her suffering with courage and inner strength. Both Sanjeev and Ravi were waiting for her at her workplace. They threatened her to keep her mouth shut. When Sanjeev asks her about the previous day's experience, her response was quite unexpected. She had already planned to take revenge on them. It is impossible for her to defeat them physically. Therefore she decides to dominate them psychologically. She bitterly mocked Sanjeev by saying that he was not up to her expectations. She said "I don't think you will ever be able to satisfy a woman" (108). For Ravi, she took a different approach. She told Ravi, "I liked you very much. You are a real man"(108). Whenever she meets them, she ignores Sanjeev and smiles at Ravi. Instead of avoiding meetings with them, she deliberately created situations to meet them. She went to Sanjeev's booth everyday and made phone calls to many of her friends without any specific reason. This made Sanjeev uneasy. Priya derives satisfaction through her small triumphs.

One day, when she got home, the third one among the rapists was waiting for her. He apologized to her saying that it was not intentional, and that he was trapped into their company.

When he began to cry, Priya patted his hair and tried to pacify him. She accepted the apology and let him go. Priya's humanity, emotional maturity and depth are visible from this instance.

Among the three, Ravi had vengeance against her. He had abused her, slapped her, and his dominance was too harsh for her. It is evident that he is the mastermind behind the rape plan and had been waiting for a perfect time. It is impossible for Priya to forgive him. She decided to take revenge by dominating him psychologically. Ravi was confused at Priya's approach and one day he asked her why she was smiling at him. As a response Priya told him that she likes him. Then she added, "When you dominated me that day at first all I felt was shame. But then I began to like you. However far I may go away from you, my blood and tears will crave for you" (110). Ravi was shocked. With a gentle touch on his arm, Priya said him bye and walked away.

But still the traumatic memories continue to haunt her. She didn't go to office for the next two days. She felt that she was going mad and she began to hate herself again. That evening, Ravi came to Priya's home. She asked him whether he started loving her. He said yes. Priya again asked him whether his love sprouted the day she slapped him. Ravi was confused. At that moment Ravi realized that it was her revenge. Tears sprouted from his eyes. At the very next moment, he began to cry like a baby. He had actually started loving her and his love itself was the revenge. Ravi became emotionally hurt and powerless. She mentally dominated Ravi through clever behavior. With her emotional strength she made the perpetrators powerless.

In normal cases survivors of rape and sexual abuse prevent further encounters with the abusers. But here, Priya, deliberately goes and meets them and makes them powerless with her bold looks and words. Rape trauma can take months or years to be cured. Sometimes it may go on unresolved. But the next day itself Priya goes to office as usual. She mustn't have displayed any sense of grief in her face and that is why her family itself fails to understand what happened to her. She must have planned the revenge and developed emotional strength that night itself. In contrast to usual cases, she is not approaching police or court. She must have lost the faith in judiciary system or she might be afraid of secondary victimization

and the painful procedures rape victims have to undergo. She confidently takes the decision that it is she who should revenge.

In the final scene, as tears spread in her eyes, Ravi tries to console her with a gentle touch.

But shockingly he withdraws his hands as if he has touched fire. Here, the title “Fire” symbolizes Priya’s emotional state filled with anger, revenge and grief. The term ‘Fire’ has other interpretations as well. Fire is destructive as well as purifying according to Hindu mythology. Her revenge emotionally destroys the culprits as well as it purifies and calms her soul. When the men defeated her with their physical strength, Priya defeated them with her careful psychological moves.

People who are convicted of several cruel atrocities are released from prison after a while and eventually they get back to their normal lives. But the affected people and their families never get rid of their grief and trauma. There are several cases that go unnoticed due to prestige issues, fear and life threat. In this story, the central character gains satisfaction by suppressing her pain within herself and thus avoiding secondary victimization. She severely criticizes Sanjeev’s masculinity, what he considers his strength and power. She also manipulates the feelings of Ravi and makes him emotionally weak and powerless. Her psychological domination over the men is the most severe punishment they could ever get. By portraying Priya’s resistance through psychological strength rather than physical force, Fire redefines revenge and survival from a feminist perspective. The story critiques patriarchal notions of masculinity, exposes the commodification of the female body, and interrogates societal responses to sexual violence. Ultimately, the article argues that Fire offers a radical reimagining of female resilience, where emotional agency becomes both a means of survival and a form of justice.

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