

**Research Article**

## **‘Until the Whole World Tilts’: Injustice, Coercion and Resilience in Lisa Ray’s *Close to the Bone***

**Snigdha Subhrasmita<sup>1\*</sup> and Rashmi Gaur<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, <sup>2</sup>Professor of English, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Roorkee, Roorkee, Uttarakhand, India

\*Corresponding author email id: ssubhrasmita@hs.iitr.ac.in

Date of Submission: 02/02/2022; Date of Acceptance: 12/02/2022

### **ABSTRACT**

Violence against women is an attempt to control women—the purpose of abuse is not so much to inflict pain as to establish relations of dominance and submission. The patriarchal code of honour and shame advocates violence as the demarcating feature between men and women. It also absolves men of their complicity in using violence as a method of reinforcing societal and cultural norms and of using it as a means to send a message. This article highlights and explores the social forces of inequality, economic arrangements, violence and individual complicity in violence in Lisa Ray’s memoir *Close to the Bone* (2019). Men in Lisa’s life engage in not only violence but also ‘coercive control’, as defined by sociologist Evan Stark. Their actions subjugate Lisa to an alien will by violating her physical integrity (domestic violence), denying her respect and autonomy (coercion), isolating her from social connections (isolation), as well as confiscating or denying her access to the resources required for personhood and citizenship (control). The gender-specific reading of Lisa’s memoir facilitates a discussion on various forms of violence that targets women and the symbolic connotations behind these acts. Arguably, the article, taken in its entirety, allows for a more nuanced understanding of how women’s bodies and sexuality were, and are, either controlled or subjugated in patriarchal societies. Lisa—the narrator-protagonist, plays with the concepts of the individual and the collective, suggesting that women experience violence collectively rather than individually: a threat of violence against one is a threat against all.

**Keywords:** Memoir, Violence, Coercive control, Subjection, Patriarchy, Bodies

## INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is defined as 'any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life' by the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993). As a result, many seemingly harmless activities are classified as kinds of violence—and they should be because they have the same devastating consequences on women's capacities as physical violence. It is also undeniable that some women are more vulnerable to violence than others—distinctions in the state, geography, culture, class and circumstance do matter—the reality remains that no sensible woman, whether she has ever experienced violence or not, is ever entirely free of the fear of it. Fear, which is a sort of psychological abuse/trauma, adversely influences women's lives. If our concern is human security, we should commence by conceding that no woman enjoys it from conception to advanced age (Nussbaum, 2005).

Lisa Ray's memoir *Close to the Bone* (2019) is an offering derived from a life of emotions, lived 'close to the bone'. It goes beyond her battle against cancer, chronicling her extraordinary personal and professional journey and her forays in the world of modelling and cinema. During the 1990s, Ray became involved with a Man Mr X, with connection both with the underworld and the political milieu of the city. Even after Mr X got married, the relationship remained. Mr X quickly became possessive and domineering, interfering in Lisa's workplace, friendships and even dictating her appearance. Lisa afterwards became engaged with another man (A), who attempted to choke her and physically harm her while she was sleeping. She later discovered that he had taken both her money and her passport.

The threat of physical violence has been used to silence women for ages, blocking them from using their intellect and inventiveness to carve out a place in the world. Catharine MacKinnon once wrote, 'Take your foot off our necks, then you will hear in what tongue women speak', in response to Carol Gilligan's concept of a 'different voice' for women. (MacKinnon, 1987, p. 45). Lisa's memoir is an effort to restore the unspeakable brutality that still lingers in the bodies and minds of the women who have been abused and traumatised, into words.

Lisa's maiden ventures into constructing an identity are best portrayed when she writes about being reprimanded by her relatives as a little girl for turning up late to her father's ancestral house in Kolkata. She had felt like screaming at that time, 'Don't...don't...don't pinch my wings!' (Ray, 2019, ch. 2). Her wings, however, grew as large as an albatross, transporting her over countries and oceans, not only assisting her in her search for her distinct identity but also enriching her life experiences.

Violence against women is a societal plague to which no one, not even celebrities, is immune. Most of us feel that female celebrities and actors like Lisa enjoy a flawless existence because of their glossy lives and celebrity status. They have it all, from money to power, beauty to popularity. As a result, it is easy to presume that they have not dealt with the trauma of mental abuse or domestic violence. Unfortunately, they are just as susceptible to abuses, assaults and violence as their fans, and there have been numerous instances in the past when the superstars we admire have come out about their difficult private relationships and the harassment and discrimination they suffered at the hands of their partners. Lisa used her memory to write her memoir. Her story makes her personal experiences public; it becomes an act of testimony. The testimonial nature of Lisa's memoir gives hope to other cancer patients in general (as Lisa writes about her cancer healing journey in her memoir), but specifically, it sheds light on the gendered and relational dimension of violence she experiences.

Lisa's act of narrating her personal recollection is an attempt to put into words the untold memories that exist within the violated bodies of women. Lisa's utterances become cries, silences and glimpses from her past existence as she negotiates the intricacies and gaps of language. The surreal and metaphorical language that she uses in her memoir validates that pain cannot be explained or made explicit. Unfathomable aches can only be cried or roused but cannot be described.

## **INJUSTICE**

Gender injustice, sexism, harassment and other challenges exhibiting gender inequality have always been a serious issue in our society. Although numerous laws exist worldwide that pledge equality and forbid discrimination based on gender, the 'film industry' remains one of the last battlegrounds for gender equality (O'Regan, 2016). 'The enemy of suppression is giving voice to our wounds and injustice. Each voice adds weight until the whole world tilts, I wrote in my journal. And even though carjackings and violence persisted, I kept walking and walking' (Ray, 2019, ch. 12). Be it Hollywood or Bollywood, the film industry has a lasting impact on people's thoughts, but they are all troubled by long-term gender inequality and harassment, revealing the terrible status of women.

When Lisa forayed into her acting career and was shooting for a south movie, she was asked to wear a strange garment with a massive plastic bottom sewed into the back. Lisa was incredibly slender and self-conscious about her weight at that time. It made her feel humiliated. She had worked so hard to stay thin, and now they were telling her that her body was still wrong. She says, 'I fought against the bum shorts, but I really had no choice. They wanted curvy, and they got it' (Ray, 2019, ch. 8). Many forms of injustice have been perpetuated by negative or erroneous ideas of varied women's bodies,

typically rooted in racist, heterosexist, patriarchal, and nativist ideologies. They foster physical aggression towards women and girls (Adams, 1990; Leclerc-Madlala, 2002). They also advocate problematic ideals of beauty and femininity (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Jeffreys, 2005). Female bodies of multiple kinds, including famished bodies, suffering bodies, restricted bodies and super sexualised bodies, have been produced as a result of concrete social practises and policies incorporated in coercive ideologies (e.g. inequality in the distribution of food, predatory work conditions, hazardous beauty rituals). Converging patterns of domination and injustice shape and structure how women experience their bodies and how society views, regulates and controls women's bodies.

The social system prescribes individuals' positions in society based on their gender. Women have obeyed and adhered to these guidelines to be accepted by society. Consequently, the human body is considered a reflection of society. Judith Butler theorises in her *Bodies that Matter*,

If gender is the social construction of sex and if there is no access to this "sex" except by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender but that "sex" becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access. (Butler, 1993, p. 5)

Lisa Writes, 'In the misogynistic studio system, women are more disposable than men. We were "newspaper items", I remember hearing, hot until next day's news' (ch. 7). There were always whispers about what each heroine had done to get to where she was, but the men's reputations stayed unblemished—or rather, became more so with each affair. Depending on whether one was 'in' or 'out', there were subgroups founded by movie dynasties or successful producers and directors that acted as safe havens or tyrants. Women were arrayed against each other in the age-old stereotype that females are catty, salacious, nasty and judgmental. 'A strict code of Omerta was observed in the film industry, creating a culture of silence and silencing around any sort of scandal or sexual harassment' (ch. 7). Because the way a film set runs is often feudal and hierarchical, this plainly reveals the predatory mentality of the industry, which thrives primarily due to unequal power dynamics. Most of the exploiters wield enormous authority, making it difficult for actresses to speak out against them. Women who are harassed by sexual predators sometimes do not report their complaints for fear of losing their employment, embarrassment or the financial and social consequences. 'Women like us are built to endure' (ch. 13). Female actors are usually expected to blend seamlessly with a masculine lead hero. Women working in other aspects of the film industry, such as scriptwriters, are also subjected to this discrimination. 'You need to be either the vamp or the sweet, virginal lead. You decide' (ch. 8).

Patriarchy, which is based on the idea of women's inferiority and impurity, becomes a justification for their subordination. It runs through the labyrinths of socio-cultural gender discrimination and excuses all questions regarding women's rights.

I was told I couldn't sit inside the temple because I'm a woman. My brain, of course, said, 'This sucks, what's up with that?' But I did sit, in the courtyard, with the damn dupatta over my head, and then left behind my agitation at the injustice. (ch. 14)

Lisa's acceptance of the social norms proves that the complicated mechanism of social conditioning (and cultural values) that emerges from patriarchal gender relations is so deeply embedded in our society that even highly educated women like Lisa are susceptible to what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic domination' perpetuated by 'misrecognition' and marginalisation (Bourdieu, 2000; Wacquant, 1989).

## COERCION AND VIOLENCE

Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist, analysed feminist existentialism in her seminal work, *The Second Sex*, stating that a woman is made rather than born.

One is not born but rather becomes a woman. No biological, physiological or economic fate determines the figure that the human being presents in society: it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creative indeterminate between male and eunuch which is described as feminine. (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 273)

Lisa talks about her long association with Mr X—a strong, powerful, shady, Mr Fixit-type who liaised between senior IPS officers, politicians, underworld and Bollywood celebrities.

This relationship continued for most of my time in Bombay – it was like a never-ending hike through the bad lands of my self-esteem, a psychological desert where laughter was short and scornful. Mr X soon became possessive and controlling. He interfered in my work life, my friendships and even dictated the way I looked. I thought that was how love worked. (ch. 7)

When one partner in a relationship dominates, the situation is not only unfair or annoying for the other. It has harmful short- and long-term repercussions. This too happened with Lisa. She writes, 'Mr X was becoming increasingly paranoid and he didn't want me to go on location for more than a month. I was so naive that I believed I was putting my relationship first by consenting to his wishes' (ch. 7). Sometimes it is clear when someone is abusing us in a relationship, but this is not always the scenario. In Lisa's case, Mr X professed his love, lavished her with attention, and was always there for her. This made everything more perplexing for Lisa, and she was ready to be the other

woman in his life (because she knew that he was already married). However, just because a partner appears to be kind and helpful at times does not make the abuse acceptable. Mr X controlled her and monitored whatever she did. Mr X practised what sociologist Evan Stark theorised as 'coercive control'. According to Stark (2007), coercive control is a gendered social phenomenon. Stark refers to various gender theories, principally understanding gender as a sort of structural inequality that assigns uneven resources and duties to men and women.

Women are more vulnerable to coercive control methods than males due to their gender allocation. 'Unlike other capture crimes, coercive control ... is gendered in that it relies for its impact on women's vulnerability as women due to sexual inequality' (p. 5). Stark argues coercive control contributes to systemic gender inequality by prohibiting women from 'freely developing their personhood, maximising their capacities, or engaging in citizenship' (p. 4). Mr X was a controlling man who had his own masterful way of making Lisa believe that she was responsible for everything that was happening in their relationship and only she could smooth the waters by doing his bidding.

Physical violence is one of the most common types of violence against women, and it is frequently perpetrated by the spouse or another male family member. This act of abuse includes physical pain, whether by direct hitting or the use of a weapon, and has substantial health and psychological consequences for the victim, with unreasonable force and severe physical assaults sometimes leading to death. Since controlling men have a sense of entitlement, they see their abusive behaviours as appropriate and even loving. 'Though reforms and laws to address woman abuse have been a step in the right direction to reduce violence against women, a lot of excuses and concepts adopted by the abuser who abuses his wife, thus reframing their abusive acts as non-abusive' (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 2).

Women of all races, colours, cultures, ages and social classes are victims of physical violence, ranging from being 'slapped, punched, kicked, or thrown' to being 'scalded, sliced, choked, smothered, or bitten' by physically aggressive men (Koss et al., 1994, p. 42). Lisa's relationship with a person she refers to as 'A' in her memoir was very abusive and toxic. While she was sleeping, he tried to strangle her and physically harm her. 'The next day ... I discovered A had stolen my passport and a large amount of cash' (Ray, 2019, ch. 11). Lisa Writes,

I spent an hour or so packing before I lay down in my empty room and went to sleep. Sometime in the middle of the night, I felt a weight on my body. I opened my eyes. A had climbed up on top of me. I thought I was dreaming. It was dark, and I was fuzzy with sleep. It was the swaying of the bed that had woken me, and suddenly I became aware of a pressure building up in my chest and ribs. He had

put his hands around my throat and was squeezing. I looked up into his eyes, and I saw the most, terrifying hollow expression. I realised: He's not there. I tried to speak to him, choking out the words: 'What are you doing?' It was like he was possessed. Time slowed down as I fluttered in and out of consciousness, kicking as he bore down, squeezing harder. He had an absolute iron grip around my throat, and I felt my kicks get weaker and weaker. My brain was on fire, white specks in my vision. Thoughts began passing quickly through my mind: Is this how it's going to end? Really? (ch. 11)

Lisa's story is an attempt to put into words the unimaginable horror that still exists in the bodies and brains of women who have been assaulted and traumatised, including herself. By deconstructing her subjectivity as well as her affective and social worlds, A utilises physical and symbolic violence to shatter her voice and agency. On the one hand, violence against men seeks to undermine a sense of strength; on the other hand, violence against women aims to invalidate a woman's role in society. In the face of oppression and dispossession, Lisa maintains herself and finds a voice. Her story gives her a way of connecting with herself after being robbed of her emotions and subjected to extreme physical and psychological assault. Lisa also focuses the readers' attention on her battle to find a voice during and after her physical assault experience.

She writes, 'I have no recollection of how I opened the door and bolted, still in my pyjamas, barefoot. It must have been 4.30 or 5 a.m. and I ran and ran and wouldn't stop. I watched the streets waver and splinter in my vision when I stumbled' (ch. 11). She could see him coming after her as she looked back. The road was wet and slick, but her legs kept carrying her onward. She dashed in front of a car that had slowed down. 'The man inside hit the brakes and leaned his head out the window: "Are you all right? Do you need help?" I could see A coming – not a single hair out of place – and all I could think was: He's going to manipulate and mangle the situation. I was shaking, tiny needles biting into my eyes and body. He's going to gaslight me, and he's going to do it so well that this man is going to believe him and leave me behind on this street. 'Please, get him away from me!' I pleaded. I screamed. I was frantic' (ch. 11).

A's use of physical and symbolic violence on Lisa scares her and dismantles her subjectivity and everyday world. The assault breaks her voice, sense of selfhood and agency. According to Scarry (1985), physical pain lacks a voice and visibility because it cannot be conveyed explicitly. Pain, according to Scarry, not only resists but also destroys speech since it unmakes the world by obliterating a person's personality and voice. Pain drives a person to revert to a prelinguistic condition of being, in which sounds or screams articulate pain. This is explored thoroughly by Scarry in her *Bodies in Pain*. Lisa screamed in front of the stranger in the car because she could not find any

words to communicate her pain. It was more important at that moment to get away from the assailant. She was more scared by thinking that A could gaslight her and manipulate things. The argument that violence impairs regular activities captures core aspects of Lisa's experience. However, what Lisa does different lies in her attempts to fight disintegration and articulate her unsayable experiences of pain and subjection through words, descriptions and silences in her memoir.

## **RESILIENCE**

Turner (2008) illustrates how cultural, social and political issues are represented and battled out by the body in response to his notions of a semiotic society. Feminist theorists study the body in a phallogentric culture, taking into account narratives on the body. Elizabeth Grosz argues that bodies are volatile as they respond and interact, function productively and proactively, and generate unexpected, innovative and startling results. (Grosz 1994). Female bodies that are ethnically, sexually and culturally oppressed oppose the morals and aesthetics of power institutions due to their fluidity and variability. Lisa's body is both the topic and instrument through which she tells her story. The assault on her body makes her body a battleground on which she wages war with herself in silence and words.

This may be hard to understand but it's not so unusual in incidents of abuse. I didn't want to revisit it or go backwards...Looking back, I now understand that I was angry but perhaps not angry enough. I feel in some cases, anger is a cover for stilled and silent grief. I used to feel something behind my anger, a tidal wave gathering, and this, huge looming feeling made me shut down, dam it up. (ch. 11)

Lisa's rage was a method for expressing both her power and her powerlessness. She wished she could undo what had happened to her, but she was unable to do so. What she could do was leave, but A had taken her passport, robbing her of her right to identity and citizenship (coercive control). The ideal of the selfless, ever-nurturing 'perfect mother' whose mission is to help, console, accept, cooperate, comprehend and foster relationship harmony is instilled in gender role socialisation for femininity (Bernardez, 1988). Women's anger is problematic because it disrupts the status quo (Miller, 1983). These skills are well-learned by women like Lisa, who often suppress their anger to avoid unpleasant consequences. Lisa was in a sense powerless because she could not express her anger but confines it within her body. At the same time, her anger made her powerful because she reported the incident to the police station. Richardson, a police officer, photographed the bruises on her neck and completed the 'Victim Personal Statement' report. 'Later, I would tuck that report in my Day Timer to remind myself never to become a victim again. I didn't call my family. I didn't want to tell anyone' (ch. 11).

The feeling of embarrassment is the most typical reason why victims like Lisa do not speak up. Abuse is degrading and dehumanising by its very nature. As a result of another person's acts, many victims experience a sense of invasion or helplessness. Being physically abused instils a sense of dehumanisation in Lisa. We want to believe that we have control over what happens to us. When any kind of abuse endangers our personal supremacy, we feel embarrassed. This sense of humiliation can lead to victims blaming themselves for the perpetrator's acts. Lisa tells herself 'never to become a victim again' (ch. 11).

Lisa's act of narrating and writing her own memoir shows her resilience as well as resistance to her subjection. She completes the delicate process of piecing herself into a coherent whole through her memoir. Her utterances act as testimony, craft her story and most importantly, re-socialise her bodily experience of violence in the wake of the harrowing ordeal.

## CONCLUSION

Lisa's memoir is not only about her personal story. It is an endeavour to put into words the unspeakable savagery that still exists in the bodies and minds of women who have been assaulted and traumatised. It also situates the issue of violence against women in the context of social factors rather than individual traits. Faced with the problem of saying the unsayable, Lisa's narrative moves between speech and quiet. She constructs herself as a collective subject who strives to maintain her subjectivity in the face of dispossession and subjugation. Her memoir is one of the tools she uses to restore her ability to live in a meaningful way. Her resilience and open discussions of 'private' violence undermine the patriarchal and oppressive social system and deconstruct the dualistic relationship between the personal and public realms.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, C.J. (1990) *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. Continuum.
- Bartky, S.L. (1990) *Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression*. New York: Routledge.
- Beauvoir, S.D. (1956) *The Second Sex* (H. M. Parshley, Trans.). Jonathan Cape. (Original work published 1949).
- Bernardez, T. (1988) *Women and Anger: Cultural Prohibitions and the Feminine Ideal*. Wellesley College.
- Bordo, S. (1993) *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. University of California Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2000) *Pascalian Meditations*. (R. Nice, Trans.). Polity Press.
- Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. Routledge.

- Das, V. (2008) 'Violence, Gender, and Subjectivity', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 37.
- Grosz, E. (1994) *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. pp. 283–299.
- Human Rights Watch (2016) *World Report 2016*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016>.
- Jeffreys, S. (2005) *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West*. Routledge.
- Koss, M.P. *et al.* (1994) *No Safe Haven: Male Violence Against Women at Home, at Work, and in the Community*. American Psychological Association.
- Leclerc-Madlala, S. (2002) 'On the Virgin Cleansing Myth: Gendered Bodies, AIDS and Ethnomedicine', *African Journal of AIDS Research*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 87–95. <https://doi.org/10.2989/16085906.2002.9626548>
- MacKinnon, C. (1987) *Feminism Unmodified*. Harvard University Press.
- Miller, J.B. (1983) *The construction of anger in men and women*. Work in progress, Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College, Stone Center.
- Nussbaum, M.C. (2005) 'Women's bodies: violence, security, capabilities', *Journal of Human Development*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 167–183.
- O'Regan, J. (2016) *Gender Inequality in Entertainment*. *Odyssey*. <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/gender-inequality-in-the-entertainment-industry>.
- Ray, L. (2019) *Close to the Bone*. HarperCollins. <https://www.amazon.in/Close-Bone-Lisa-Ray-ebook/dp/B07QYYRBZ4>
- Scarry, E. (1985) *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press.
- Stark, E. (2007) *Coercive Control: The Entrapment of Women in Personal Life*. Oxford University Press.
- Turner, B.S. (2008) *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*. SAGE.
- United Nations (1993) *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (A/RES/48/104)*. <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/vaw/v-overview.htm>
- Wacquant, L.J. (1989) 'Towards a reflexive sociology: a workshop with Pierre Bourdieu', *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/202061>

**How to cite this article:** Subhrasmita, S. and Gaur, R. (2022) 'Until the Whole World Tilts': Injustice, Coercion and Resilience in Lisa Ray's *Close to the Bone*, *Journal of Exclusion Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 60-69.