

## **Interrogating Impunity through Counterpublic: Rethinking Habermas's Public Sphere in Paulaumi Duttgupta's *Onaatah of the Earth***

SAKSHI SINGH & ANURAG KUMAR  
Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University, India

The present paper aims at analyzing the inevitable relationship of patriarchal impunity with counterpublic in India with reference to *Onaatah of the Earth* (2017) by Paulaumi Duttgupta. It is apparent that much of the discourse on counterpublic emphasizes on either countering the existing state agencies as mentioned by Nancy Fraser where she critiques the exclusionary practices of bourgeois public sphere labeling the process as undemocratic or advocating locational counterpublic to uplift the subalterns to establish democracy discussed by Kanika Batra. However, not much has been discussed about the exclusion of discourses critiquing impunity which forms an essential background to establish a correlation between patriarchal impunity and the counterpublic. Thus, the paper attempts to examine bourgeois public sphere mainly as a patriarchal discursive arena disseminating and strengthening the idea of impunity granted, especially in cases of sexual violence within the framework of Habermas's public sphere. The study also focuses on how the novel *Onaatah of the Earth* acts as a counterpublic to undermine or neutralize the impunity by addressing issues related to gender sensitivity bringing them forth not only in discursive space but in activism too.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, impunity, counterpublic, public sphere, sexual violence

Counterpublic, as a theoretical framework, has experienced an efficacious upsurge in recent times dealing with matters of gender, democracy, location which are not only integral constituents of our culture but also form an indispensable part of wide spectrum of academia. However, as an essential component of a comprehensive range of discourses, counterpublic has witnessed conflicting standpoints by various researchers and academicians addressing various unfamiliar issues demanding a much required attention. Nancy Fraser has provided a different outlook concerning counterpublic with a critique of Habermas's public sphere propounding on various exclusionary practices that have been significant in the formation of Habermas's bourgeois public sphere. Where Habermas's public sphere stood for incorporating distinct deliberations on different issues for the welfare of the public, according to Fraser (1990), "the full utopian potential of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere was never realized in practice" (p. 58). There is an inexorable exclusion of certain groups from the mainstream public discursive domain which makes it a biased and restrictedly driven sphere for contemplation of ideas. Nancy Fraser contests that gender becomes an inevitable part of those exclusionary groups and this contention is assisted by Landes, who proposes that due to gender disparity, women are denied a

---

Correspondence to: Sakshi Singh, School of Languages and Literature, Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University, Katra-182 320, Jammu, India.

place in the traditionally formed public arena. Commenting on the emerging of the bourgeois public sphere based on gender inequality, Landes (1988) asserts that, “a new, austere style of public speech and behavior was promoted, a style deemed rational, virtuous and manly. In this way, masculinist gender constructs were built into the very conception of the republican public sphere” (as cited in Fraser, 1990, p. 59). Landes’s claim reveals the unavoidable bracketing of particular sections of society, in this case, women, which has metamorphosed the public sphere into a singular, male-dominated territory. The same exclusion has also been talked about by Geoff Eley (1987) who asserts that, “it was the arena, the training ground, and eventually the power base of a stratum of bourgeois men, who were coming to see themselves as a universal class and preparing to assert their fitness to govern” (as cited in Fraser, 1990, p. 60). The dismissal of women from the conventional bourgeois domain nullifies Habermas’s ideal public sphere validating the argumentation that it indeed, was, “a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule” (Fraser, 1990, p. 62) and regulates itself in accordance with the already constituted bourgeois sphere.

Based on the aforementioned discussions and discourses suggested by the critics, it becomes perceptible that gender is a major construct which causes impertinent exclusion of women from the public sphere. For instance, Chhetri (2014) mentioned that despite women constituting a significant portion of the population of the world, they are still denied a substantial representation in politics. He asserts, “opined that women’s presence in politics can contribute a different perspective based on their identity and experiences as women - otherwise overlooked by all male legislations” (Chhetri, 2014, p. 73). However, it is observed that, “the inadequate representation of women in politics however is a problem in all the democratic countries of the world today” and that the women across the world have an, “average of only 21.4 per cent in combined houses of parliament” (p. 73), which is indicative of the an explicit exclusion of women from the process of decision making. It is, therefore, this debarment of gender that leads them to create alternative counterpublics to counter the existing materialistic mainstream ideology voicing their opinions and get the recognition which they have been denied. That is precisely why, as Mary Ryan (1990) depicts, women turn to the realm of counterpublics to secure, “access routes to public political life, even despite their exclusion from the official public sphere” (as cited in Fraser, 1990, p. 61). Emphasizing the role of women in constructing counterpublics, Ryan (1990) again points out that, “this involved building a counter-civil society of alternative woman-only voluntary associations...these associations aped all-male societies built by these women’s fathers and grandfathers; yet in other respects the women were innovating, since they creatively used the heretofore quintessentially private idioms of domesticity and motherhood precisely as springboards for public activity” (as cited in Fraser, 1990, p. 61). The arguments of various critics (Nancy Fraser, Landes, Geoff Elley, Ryan) for the biased and disputed configuration of the public sphere, is suggestive of how intensely and severely the public sphere has transformed itself into a brutal patriarchal capitalist province.

The public sphere is heavily governed and controlled by the patriarchal streak of bourgeois, hence it permits very selective discourses in its vicinity according to its own convenience and self seeking interests. The Khap Panchayats in India, for example, are quintessential example of a gendered public sphere which does not allow women as part of council. Moreover, all the discourse in these panchayats are governed and controlled by the Khap members and eventually the judgments passed by them possess a highly patriarchal streak. An incident reported in Kolar village, Sarda tehsil of Udaipur by the media unveiled the ruthlessness of the Khap panchayat when a woman was stripped naked

in front of the whole village because she tried to elope with a man (Passi, 2015, para 3). In another incident in Meerut), the panchayat ordered the rape of two dalit girls as a punishment for their brother, who had eloped with the girl belonging to the community of the jats (Passi, 2015, para 5). These episodes imply the deep rooted patriarchal mindset existing in the public sphere which views women merely as objects, they also signify that sexual violence against women is perceived in the most casual and unconcerned manner, depicting that the bourgeois public sphere is not a gender sensitive space.

The discursive space belonging to the patriarchal sphere considers sexual violence more like an amusement and it does not give a serious and earnest concern to sexual violence against women. Many prominent figures of the country, especially the politicians who are substantial in constructing and maintaining the public sphere have been noticed making extreme lewd comments concerning sexual violence. For instance, making lewd remarks the Samajwadi Party Chief, Mulayam Singh Yadav said, "Boys and girls ... they had differences, and the girl went and gave a statement...I have been raped...And...poor fellows, three of them have been sentenced to death. Should rape cases lead to hanging? Boys are boys, they make mistakes" (Rizwaan, 2015, para 3). Further, the leader of Haryana Khap Panchayat, Sube Singh Sumain too, blamed women for suffering due to rapes and asserted, "I think that girls should be married at the age of 16, so that they have their husbands for their sexual needs, and don't need to go elsewhere. This way, rapes will not occur" (Rizwaan, 2015, para 13). The mention of crude remarks and mentality of some of the major renowned faces only reflects that bourgeois, being a major component of the existing public sphere, disseminates a highly patriarchal discourse which is least interested and hardly concerned about the gravity of sexual violence committed against women. The same discourse further fosters a secured dominion for the patriarchy granting them impunity to function at their own free will. This arena constitutive of an apathetic and insensitive discourse excludes women and the sexual violation of their bodies from the mainstream public sphere. Hence, women do not form a part of the discursive arena and are relegated outside the traditional patriarchy driven milieu, which compels them to develop their own discourse to bring forth their standpoints, creating their own public in opposition to the conventionally established bourgeois sphere. Many women, especially writers like Paulami Duttgupta, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Suchitra Banerjee, have been inextricably involved in the process of generating a counter hegemonic discourse through their works to stand in defiance of the exclusion asserted by the patriarchal bourgeois domain. One of such works is *Onaatah of the Earth* by Paulami Duttgupta, a fictional account of a young girl Onaatah who gets raped and becomes a victim of the subsisting patriarchal oppression in the mainstream society.

The novel *Onaatah of the Earth* revolves around Onaatah, a nurse who is captured and raped at night by a group of young men and left to die but is saved. The story depicts her struggles to face the stigma associated with rape victims by the society including her fiancé and his mother. The novel traces the trajectory of Onaatah from staunchly fighting for her honor to falling into depression and facing identity crisis. It also exhibits the journey she takes to recover and the way she comes out unchained and emancipated. The major concern arising out of the novel is to analyze why was Onaatah raped? What was her fault? While going through the novel and observing the instances as mentioned in it, it seems that the only troublesome issue in this particular case is that she is a woman who becomes a prey at the hands of the hegemonic structure of patriarchy which easily controls and uses a woman's body according to their free will, giving rise to a fixation of being undefeated and most powerful. Brownmiller (1975) mentions the falsity of being supreme that is deeply rooted in the minds of men when she asserts:

rape became not only a male prerogative, but man's basic weapon of force against woman, the principal agent of his will and her fear. His forcible entry into her body, despite her physical protestations and struggle, became the vehicle of his victorious conquest over her being, the ultimate test of his superior strength, the triumph of his manhood (p. 14)

Brownmiller's observation reveals that the current public sphere predominated by the impulsive patriarchal social structure incorporates a misogynist conduct towards women. Similarly, Verma (2018) in his blog questions the ongoing misogynist culture where a rape victim is forcibly married to the culprit because, "women are treated as the property of men" and that "the girl is 'damaged goods', no one will marry her" (para 3). To strengthen his argument, Verma (2018) even mentions an incident from Bareilly where a 13-year-old girl was married to her own rapist by the village elders, "13-year-old girl...raped in Bareilly... gave birth to a child...she married her rapist. Or rather, she was married off to her rapist. Village elders intervened and felt that to be the honourable course of action." (para 1). It becomes apparent that not only the metropolitan cities but the public sphere in the villages, too is effectively constituted by the patriarchal mindset of the so called village elders who have the tendency of taking decisions particularly in favor of the man in crime, thus reflecting an explicit exclusion of women from the public advocating gender disparity.

It becomes apparent that the exclusionary practices are so common in the present public domain that there is no initiative taken to bridge the gap, especially in cases of sexual violence. As a result, there fosters a sense of absolute surety of not being questioned or punished which leads men to commit such grave crimes without any fear. The assailants raping Onaatah in the novel *Onataah of the Earth*, too, fall in the same category precisely at the moment when, "three men that had come out of the car and they were trying to pull her in" (Duttagupta, 2016, p. 21) This particular moment in the novel reflects upon the audacity of being undeniably convinced about being exempted from the grave consequences of their irrational and disgraceful act, and therefore, "She was dumped onto the backseat of the car and one of the men held her hair and pulled her to him...there were hands tearing her clothes...Onaatah suddenly felt a stinging slap"( Duttagupta, 2016, p. 21) Such cruelty and brutality indicates the recklessness of patriarchy through the bunch of boys in the novel who are absolutely sure of safely getting away, thus, exhibiting the significant prevalence of impunity in the existing public sphere.

A close analysis further reveals that the discursive realm created by bourgeois engages itself in a repressive practice of controlling the freedom of women by assigning different rules of time and space. For example, girls should not go out at night, wear certain kind of clothes, should not wander alone. Violations of the guidelines assigned by the patriarchal public domain becomes an imperative cause to punish those who violate these constraints, which is further used as an example to teach lessons to other women. Onaatah, a working nurse, leaves for home at night; as the text states: "there was no taxi approaching. The road was almost deserted." (Duttagupta, 2016, p. 20) Thus, Onaatah defiles the restrictions as laid by the patriarchal bourgeois public sphere and the violation is punished by rape. Geetha (2013) in her article emphasizes on the familiar phenomenon of "don't report, don't tell...which fathers, husbands, brothers, uncles and others deploy as a sign of their intimidating power" (p. 1). Such constraints imposed upon women depict an overt concern of safety, but are used as an indirect tool to keep them in their control; when such constraints are broken, the punishment comes in the form of violation of her body. Therefore, there is a very confined rhetoric space which the bourgeois province offers when it comes to women and the sexual violation that they undergo in the contemporary scenario.

It is quite evident from the novel that Onaatah is depicted as a strong and independent working woman. Onaath works in the hospital, on her own she visits patients, and she even prefers to choose her own life partner. However, the bourgeois public sphere does not include a discourse concerning women eulogizing their independence and being a strong willed person. A girl is seen decent and virtuous if she conforms to the standard conception as given by the present public sphere which is to be submissive, dependent, non assertive, non-demanding; she will be adored and cherished if she continues to abide by the conventional criterion. On the other hand, a woman, who asserts her freedom and defies the customary norms, finds it difficult to acquire a universal acceptability as she is perceived to be immoral, corrupt and of low dignity. Therefore, the discursive arena created by the patriarchal bourgeois ensures that such women should indeed be punished and tamed if they dare to step out of the societal norms and resist compliance with the instructions. A recent news story reported that a girl was threatened and raped by a drunk man in Delhi for walking late at night with a boy. The girl, 19 years old, while roaming with the boy, was stopped by a man who abused them and gave them lessons on morality. The victim while narrating the incident, reported, "We were scared after the man abused us...asked us to return home...the man gagged me...in the darkness...beat me and pushed in a drain...The accused was drunk and threatened to kill me. He then raped me"(Kumar, 2018). The horrifying incident is illustrative of the brutal and severely deeply rooted patriarchal mindset which drives the discourse of the public sphere, according to its own preference and punishes those who tend to challenge their territory. In an interview, Mukesh Singh, one of the assailants in 2012 gang rape, complied with the concept of teaching woman a lesson who dares to cross the forbidden boundaries set by the bourgeoisie patriarchal public sphere. He claimed that, "If women are not "good", men have a right to "teach them a lesson" by raping them...the woman being raped has a responsibility to silently accept the assault. When being raped, she shouldn't fight back...be silent... allow the rape"(Taub, 2015). In *Onaatah of the Earth* too, the unrestrained individualism of Onaatah taking charge of her life on her own terms becomes a reason for her rape because women with such uninhibited and liberated ways of living are often perceived as a threat to the established hegemony of patriarchal sphere. Projansky (2001) argues that American films have created an atmosphere for female punishment. She writes:

films from the very first years of the 1900s, being active or visible in public is enough to put a woman in danger of being watched by a peeping Tom or involved in a rape or seduction. However, 1910s films commonly include threats to women who express their independence by working for a wage. In other films, women's independent expressions of sexuality eventuate in their rape (p. 7).

Hence, there continues to prevail a mindset of patriarchy to control the sexuality of free and independent women through events of rape and assault because "no matter how independent and self-sufficient the woman is, the rape heightens her vulnerability" (p. 9) and that is how patriarchy secures its dominance.

The other important factor that is apparent in *Onaatah of the Earth* is the way people around Onaatah change their behavior after she becomes a rape victim. It is absurd to find that, while the occurrence of rape makes people sympathize with the victim, it also becomes an inconsiderate reason to blame the victim. But it is absurd to note that not only the victim suffers from the extreme magnitude and severity of sexual violence, she also becomes an easy target for the society to put the blame on. For instance, Sharma (2017) in her report

observes that the dalit women in the state of Haryana or Uttar Pradesh, if raped, do not have courage to file a complaint against the assailants belonging to upper caste mainly because the decisions in the villages are governed by the local Khap Panchayats and the police too, shows a cold and disinterested response rejecting the victim's plea for justice. The reactions of these local governing bodies towards rape are absolutely patriarchal, in favor of the criminal accusing the victim which further instigates patriarchal impunity. The report mentioned the statement of the spokesperson of the Khap Panchayat, Sube Singh Samain who said, "One man can never rape a woman without consent. Sometimes in a consensual relationship, things go bad and then they take the name of rape" (Sharma, 2017). The bourgeois public sphere, which includes such panchayats, state agencies and other local bodies, has constructed a confined arena in which it maintains the ideological position that the victim of sexual violence is at fault more than the perpetrator. The bourgeois possesses an aptitude of presenting their own personal interests as the common interest of the general public and in this way the society also subscribes to the concerns as posed by the bourgeois. As Marx says, "that the class which is the ruling material force in the society is also the ruling intellectual force....it is empowered to disseminate its ideas in the realm of law, morality, religion and art, as possessing universal verity" (as cited in Habib, 2012, p. 531).

Therefore, the ideology of considering the victim guilty and the fact that the loss of virginity results in being impure is profoundly ingrained by the bourgeois in the minds of the general public in such a manner that the society supports and adheres to such opinions. Mangal Pandey, the Health Minister of Bihar, overtly depicted the patriarchal mindset when he remarked that, "Virgin, as per the dictionary, means an unmarried and pure girl. So all these words are not objectionable" (Verma, 2017). Such statements coming from prominent figures of the society exhibit that the perception regarding a rape victim being considered an impure due to the loss of her virginity is widespread and very much a part of the existing public sphere. The similar beliefs are seen manifesting in the characters of Peter and his mother in the novel *Onaatah of the Earth* who reflect similar insensitiveness towards the torture and torment which Onaatah suffers from. When Peter comes to meet Onaatah in the hospital, he was only concerned with the shame that Onaatah has brought to him and his family, "It isn't easy, Onaatah. You are going to be my wife...You know if people come to know, we will have to answer everyone...Your dignity, your chastity is gone now" (Duttagupta, 2016, p. 32). It is discerned that the virginity of a woman has been accorded with the highest value. In fact rape is viewed as, "the illegitimate deprivation of women's cherished chastity by men" (Luo, 2000, p. 4). In a village near Gujarat, there occurred an unusual ritual of going through a "sanctity test" for a woman to prove her purity. Apparently "the survivor has to keep a 40 kilogram rock on her head in order to prove her purity, and all this, to be able to continue living with her husband" (Surendran, 2015). Peter, Onaatah's fiancée in *Onaatah of the Earth*, puts the whole blame on Onaatah for the disgraceful incident and even discouraged her to fight in the court, "It was all your fault. I had told you so many times not to loiter in the dark and you didn't listen...they might take revenge...might pay someone to burn you with acid...lets hush this up" (Duttagupta, 2016, p. 33). Peter, in the novel, is a representative of the same bourgeois discursive realm which not only refrains women to become a constituent of the public sphere but also frequently uses indirect and covert ways to create a sense of danger and terror for women by giving the directions of time and space so as to sustain their dominance over them.

It is surprising to notice that the shame and blaming of the victim is not only internalized by men, but women also. They too are conditioned to believe that it is the woman who is robbed of her honor if she is raped or assaulted by a man and she should

not defile the norms of society, which apparently are set by patriarchal public discourse. In the regular, conventional society, there exists a dialectic relationship with the public sphere. On one hand, they remain excluded from the wider public discursive domain but on the other hand, they also conform to the rules and regulations as laid by the patriarchal discourse. Hence, women start accepting, endorsing and internalizing the same views which are covertly impregnated by the bourgeois public sphere and participate in barring women who fall prey to the sexual violence and despise them for being robbed off their honor. Peter's mother, in *Onaatah of the Earth*, portrays the same mentality of detesting the rape victim when she tells Onaatah that, "how inappropriate she was for her son and had blamed her for the assault she had gone through...she doubted Onaatah had had an affair with Joe and had tricked him into intimacy" (Duttagupta, 2016, p. 48). The same manifestation is also depicted through the character of a lady journalist, who despite being a woman interrogated Onaatah with the most demeaning and insulting questions asking her, "about what she was wearing on that night. She had wanted details about how deep the neckline of her top was, if her jeans was too tight, and if Onaatah had teased Joe when they were in college" (Duttagupta, 2016, p. 57). It is indeed dreadful to discover women acting on behalf of the same bourgeois public sphere which has expelled them from participating in the mainstream domain. However, it continues to remain a dark reality that women, "are silently encouraging this violence and hatred against women...sadly they are not a miniscule minority. This tribe of women is huge and they refuse to see any reason" (Duttagupta, 2016, p. 69). The bourgeois patriarchal sphere succeeds in employing every section or group to their advantages -- including women -- to strengthen their ideology. Asha Mirje, a female politician in India, in an interview commented on the Nirbhaya rape case asserting, "Did Nirbhaya...have to go to watch a movie at 11 in the night with her friend?... Rapes take place...because of a woman's clothes, her behavior... her presence at inappropriate places...Women must be 'careful'...and think if they are inviting assault"(Reuters, 2014). Asha Mirje represents that section of women who despite belonging to the excluded group of women, continue to conform and comply with the perceptions of the mainstream public sphere. All India Progressive Women's Association retorted back after these comments went on air saying that, "every time such a statement is made by a public figure it justifies rape"(Reuters, 2014), which explains the indispensable role women play in consolidating the dominant existence of the public sphere.

There is another kind of internalization which is successfully manifested in women, especially rape victims by the bourgeois discursive space, that they blame themselves for suffering the sexual violation. Luo (2000), points out that the women who after being raped, "feel guilty about bringing disgrace to their family particularly their sexual partners" (p. 9) and "women often turned to blaming themselves for not taking appropriate precautions..." (p. 9). Internalizing the same disposition created by the patriarchal discursive milieu, Onaatah is dragged into the gloomy darkness of depression and dejection. Onaatah starts to lose her confidence or more importantly her own identity. Frustrated at her circumstances, Onaatah confesses to her sister that, "Everyday there is something breaking within me. I no longer feel attracted to anything. So much has changed that sometimes I feel in a few months' time I will no longer be myself" (Duttagupta, 2016, p. 64). Onaatah, as a woman, is depicted as strong and empowered, working against the already existing public sphere; but, after she is raped, there comes a point when she fails to act completely out of this arena. She tends to blame herself; thus, Onaatah conforms to the convictions and outlooks as put forth by the patriarchal bourgeois sphere. It is an undeniable fact that intense practice of such brutality not only harms women physically, but has more grave and long lasting effects psychologically, causing a manifestation of constant fear in their

minds and a proneness to attempt suicides. There have been many incidents where the rape victim is so shaken and shattered by the incident that committing suicide seems the only solution left for them. Recently, a case was reported in Odisha where a minor girl from a tribal community got raped by security personnel and eventually committed suicide. The police also denied any evidence of gang rape" ("Girl commits suicide" 2018). Later, Taraprasad Bahinipati, the member of legislative assembly, demanded an interrogation to attain justice. He remarked, "The state government and the Crime Branch are responsible for the death of the Kunduli gang rape victim. She committed suicide as the Crime Branch could not investigate the matter properly." ("Girl commits suicide" 2018). In another incident in Muzaffarnagar, a woman working with Accredited Social Health Activist organization committed suicide after being raped. The news reported that, "The victim, a 40-year-old health worker, committed suicide last week after the rape video was circulated on WhatsApp allegedly by her rapist, Shahid, who is also a resident of the same village" (Ali, 2016). Thus, such incidents stand as examples to the reality that there exists a conflicting correlation between the public sphere and women; but at the end of it, the beliefs of the patriarchal discursive domain overpower and subdue the mainstream society.

In a contradictory and disputable association with the mainstream bourgeois public domain, there is an intentional endeavour to call to attention the exclusionary practices which are absolutely unjustifiable and uncalled for. An attempt has been initiated in the form of creating a counterpublic discourse in order to counter the beliefs and ideas of the conventional patriarchal public sphere so that the eliminated groups procure an authentic and authoritative platform to create a recognizable identity for themselves. Since a major exclusion from the public sphere is based on gender, women, like Paulami Duttgupta, have begun to take the initiative of rejecting the mainstream ideology of the bourgeois public domain and create an alternative sphere for women and the grave issues concerning them through literary works like *Onataah of the Earth*. The author with the portrayal of the character of Onataah tries to venture in the arena of counterpublic, defying the traditionalist views propagated by the bourgeois public sphere when it comes to matters of women or sexual violence against them.

There was a news reported that a girl from Mizoram working in Delhi was gang raped and how the teasing and insults hurled at her by the people made her leave her job, "her colleagues avoided her and even her friends, some from the Northeast themselves and thus expected to be a source of emotional support, had stopped meeting her...It became very difficult for her to live in Delhi. She was feeling ostracised by neighbours and friends" (Siddiqui, 2011). Such is the influence of the opinions of the patriarchal public sphere that people fear to step out of their defined perimeter and those who do are ruthlessly pulled back worrying that they might get excluded too. Peter, Onataah's fiancée, is engaged in the practices of constraining Onataah according to the rules of the public sphere when he tells her, "Don't talk to anybody and when policeman comes today, just, tell him that your head was muddled or something..." (Duttgupta, 2016, p. 33). While Peter, as a character depicts how deeply the patriarchal ideology has become an indispensable part of the whole society, Onataah objects to these customs accusing her fiancée of being as dominating and patriarchal as the society when she says, "No Peter. You are just the symbol of what our society thinks...This was you dictating terms to me...It is you who has a problem. It is you who thinks in such patriarchal terms" (Duttgupta, 2016, p. 34) and thus, refusing to bow down and eventually standing against her fiancée, "...I am taking this case all the way. I will see to it that my rapists are punished. I cannot let them pounce on another woman. And I cannot let them scout free after what they have done to me" (Duttgupta, 2016, p. 34).



The author attempts to disseminate the idea that sexual violence against women is a recurring phenomenon and it is not a problem of an individual woman but a social issue which does not need to be barred or rejected as demanded by the public sphere rather requires a counter discourse to obliterate the notions diffused and circulated by the bourgeois public sphere. Onaatah, too, decides not to comply with the principles of public sphere which believes that, "A rape victim is already dead for the society" (Dutttagupta, 2016, p. 56); Onaatah refuses to suffer like a meek victim, but fights for justice, "I want to record my statement" (Dutttagupta, 2016, p. 29), even when people around refrained her from doing so. Her courage becomes explicit when she talks about it openly, "I want to talk to the press...have not slept for nights, not eaten proper meal since the incident...I have decided to be a survivor and not a victim...I feel talking is the only way to overcome my grief" (Dutttagupta, 2016, p. 44) and she finally succeeds in getting the assailants arrested. The resistance of Onaatah and her open assertiveness regarding the assault that she suffered is exemplary of a miniature discourse which can evolve to become a major macrocosm reality with proper concern and contribution. The initiation of such kinds of counterpublics has a potential to undermine the already functioning patriarchal discourse which does not allow a space for excluded groups to flourish. Many women have started to come out in open to record statements and talk about the violation of their bodies, thus assisting in flourishing of the counterpublics. A girl from Rohtak who was gang raped decided to put the perpetrators behind bars by recording her statement to the police. Suman Dahiya, the vice chairman of Women Commission Haryana avered, "As per the doctors, she is now medically fit to give the statement. It clearly appears from the girl's statement that whatever happened with her was absolutely wrong" ("Rohtak gang-rape", 2016). Likewise, Onaatah takes the beginner's step towards fabricating the counterpublic through her daring and confronting responses to a lady journalist who was indirectly accusing her of her condition asserting, "No, it was easy because it was not my fault. It was easy to put them into prison because what I was wearing doesn't matter. It was easy ...there are laws in the country that helps us look up criminals" (Dutttagupta, 2016, p. 58), breaking down the ideological barriers instilled in the society by the patriarchal sphere.

As evident as it seems, creating a counterpublic against an already established bourgeois public sphere, which is highly patriarchal in its approach, is an extremely hard and complex process since the notions and beliefs perpetuated by the bourgeois public sphere are intricately absorbed and followed by the rest of the public and this, in turn, breaks the courage and hopes of those who participate in the formation of the counterpublics. There is no doubt that Onaatah as a rape victim does not bow down to the highly patriarchal public sphere and even negotiates with different agencies like family, would be in-laws, journalists to seek justice and eventually succeeds in getting the rapists punished. However, she fails to disseminate her exploitation in the public sphere because the overall social climate surrounding Onaatah supports and assists the patriarchal doctrines of the same. While pondering over her struggle to fight the world, she realizes that she has never felt so broken and vulnerable, "... all this will not go away. My family keeps suffering silently. This is like life imprisonment ...I am not sure I am strong enough to face all this...What is the point of dragging on with a meaningless life?" (Dutttagupta, 2016, p. 70). Onaatah's mental and emotional breakdown is a confirmed testimony of how powerful and inescapable the bourgeois patriarchal public sphere is and how it turns out to be so severe for the excluded groups to come out of the circumscribed arena seeking a substitutive space for articulation of opinions. Onaatah's failure of not being able to completely dissociate herself from the dominant patriarchal bourgeoisie sphere necessitated the need of a counterpublic to help her realize her strength as an individual and come out as empowered.

If we observe closely, we analyze that in India, the public sphere is synonymous with urban bourgeois educated spatial arena of the society explicitly excluding people from rural, marginal, tribal, working class groups, which do not have an advantage of being a significant component of the official public sphere. However, all the mentioned excluded groups from the public sphere do not necessarily counter its existing ideologies and perceptions. In fact, many of them obey and imbibe the views and opinions of the dominant public sphere so intensely that they begin to view them as their own ideas and begin to live in the mirage created by the bourgeoisie public sphere.

A counterpublic, on the other hand, is created when an excluded section of society does not comply and subscribe to the principles and beliefs of the public sphere and forms an alternative sphere to frame their own discursive arena. The village where Onaatah is sent by her parents to, “take a holiday...stay away from known faces, known roads, known places...to give mind a chance to heal” (Duttagupta, 2016, p. 74) acts as a much required counterpublic for rape victims like Onaatah. It is a bitter reality that the memory of a rape incident continues to haunt the victim for a long time, not only because it is a violation of the body in the worst manner possible, but also for the fact that the existing bourgeoisie patriarchal public domain does not let a victim forget the incident easily and start afresh. Hence, Onaatah needs geopolitical rhetoric counterpublic to free herself from the coercion and the pressure imposed by the public sphere when she confesses to her father, “Even last night I couldn’t sleep...I get nightmares...I feel suffocated...it has been months now...will the ghost of my past ever leave me?” (Duttagupta, 2016, p. 73). The village of Onaatah’s uncle is that space which shares the interest of two sects of excluded groups, women and location. Therefore, it acts as a geopolitical rhetoric counterpublic in opposition to the bourgeoisie patriarchal public sphere thereby creating a parallel discursive arena in which the counter discourse is created on basis of gender, in case of Onaatah and geographical location, in case of the village. The people in the village like Onaatah’s uncle, aunt, Duh, Dondor, Charming and others welcome Onaatah and include her in their territory without any prejudices or differences. The village as a rhetoric counterpublic constructs an admissible and sensible environment for Onaatah as, “they were not inquisitive about why she was here or why she wasn’t on a job or married yet. That was what had made her feel home, made her feel accepted” (Duttagupta, 2016, p. 122). This is reflective of how the two well defined groups excluded from the mainstream patriarchal sphere come together in unison generating a new realm altogether which is devoid of any discrimination or exclusion and inclusive of accepting as well as respecting each other’s existence. This sense of inclusion offered by the village made Onaatah realize that, “the pause she had imposed on her life was unnecessary” (Duttagupta, 2016, p. 123). It started to recover her inner confidence and while living in the midst of the public sphere scared her to walk alone, in the village, on the contrary, breaking away from the constraints of the public sphere, “she did not realize... she had crossed a long dark stretch of road and did not feel scared or apprehensive about it. In her mind...she had crossed a dark tunnel and...had already bathed in light” (Duttagupta, 2016, p. 124). The village in the novel lies outside the periphery of the conventional norms and guidelines of the bourgeoisie public sphere, which is precisely why Duh did not shy away from falling in love with Onaatah even if she was a victim of sexual violation.

Duh, as a part of the rhetoric counterpublic, attempts to break the ideological shackles of the public sphere which so long held Onaatah that she could not stop blaming herself, “I am a rape victim...not one...there were four men...do you realize? My marriage never took place...I gave away my wedding dress to charity...the society shunned me...I am filthy...do you realize?” (Duttagupta, 2016, p. 182). Nevertheless, Duh makes an effort of

pushing her to change her perception about herself, thus, in a way encouraging her to participate in the counterpublic which further reveals the open mindedness and the sensibility of him and the entire village, "I know everything...What happened...years back has no bearing...do you think I or anyone from the village treated you differently...We might not be polished but we don't trap people in their past...What stigma... It was a bad moment it came and passed" (Dutttagupta, 2016, p. 183-84). Another character called Dondor in the novel provided an insight to Onataah about how beautiful life is and it should be cherished leaving the bitter memories behind which inculcates a sense of belief and positivism in Onataah, "I have realized you wanted me to be stronger... that you are deep within me. I can never be impure... you reside in my soul... I feel my faith has returned to me...I leave my past back" (Dutttagupta, 2016, p. 172). The characters of Duh, Dondor with their perception and outlook try to disseminate the idea that any incident of rape or assault does not result in the complete erasure of the personality or impurity of the soul. Therefore, the village as an excluded geographical location, acts as a counterpublic to undermine the patriarchal impunity granted on the discretion of the bourgeois public sphere.

This paper critiques the exclusionary practices of the bourgeois public sphere in India based on gender emphasizing that it is largely patriarchal in its functioning, thus forming a high masculinist and misogynist discursive arena. Therefore, there emerges a need for a counterpublic which counters the patriarchal interests of the public sphere and provides an authentic platform for the excluded groups to voice their opinions and create an alternative discourse. It also analyzes that since the public sphere is highly patriarchal, the concept of impunity has a significant value in the bourgeois discursive arena, due to which the issues of sexual violence against women go unnoticed, thus encouraging and strengthening the idea of patriarchal impunity. However, the discourse created by the novel *Onataah of the Earth* by Pulaumi Dutttagupta attempts to address the notion of patriarchal impunity as an absolute social construct conceived by the public sphere which needs to be questioned to ensure social justice for all the genders in the society.

The study further explores how a rape victim is often blamed and shunned by the society and that the accusation and condemning of the victim is created by the public sphere due to the masculinist and misogynist orientation of public sphere in India. In fact, women, even after being excluded from the public domain, often internalize false beliefs that a victim of sexual violence becomes impure which is again intentionally projected by the public sphere further consolidating the views of the bourgeois public sphere. *Onataah of the Earth* as a literary discourse exposes the dialectic relation that women share with the public sphere and appeal to women to reject the perceptions of the patriarchal public discursive realm and participate in the counterpublic based on the parity of gender. The paper also concentrates on the way the excluded groups based on the location and gender come together with their common interest to create an alternate counterpublic through which they venture into creating a parallel discourse in opposition to the mainstream patriarchal public sphere.

## References

- Ali, M. (2016, January 15). Muzaffarnagar tense after rape victim commits suicide. The Hindu. Retrieved from <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/Muzaffarnagar-tense-after-rape-victim-commits-suicide/article14001159.ece>
- Brownmiller, S. (1975). *Against our will: Men, women and rape*. United States. Simon and Schuster.

- Chhetri, D. Women in public sphere: An enquiry into women's representation and participation in politics. *American International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*. 72-76. Retrieved from <http://iasir.net/AIJRHASSpapers/AIJRHASS14-326.pdf>
- Duttagupta, P. (2016). *Onaatah of the Earth*. India. Readomania.
- Fraser, N. Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, No. 25/26, 56-80.
- Geetha, V. On Impunity. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 48(02), 15-17.
- "Girl commits suicide". (2018, January 22). Girl commits suicide after gang rape by security personnel. *Khaleej Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/international/india/girl-commits-suicide-after-gang-rape-by-security-personnel>
- Habib, M.A.R. (2007). *Modern literary criticism and theory: A history*. India. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Kumar, A. (2018, January 24). Drunk man beats, rapes woman for roaming late at night with male friend. *India Today*. Retrieved from [www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/drunk-man-beats-rapes-woman-for-roaming-late-at-night-with-male-friend-1152835-2018-01-24](http://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/drunk-man-beats-rapes-woman-for-roaming-late-at-night-with-male-friend-1152835-2018-01-24)
- Luo, T.Y. (2000). Marrying my rapist?: The cultural trauma among Chinese rape survivors. *Gender and Society*, 14(4), 581-597.
- Projansky, Sarah. (2001). The elusive/ubiquitous representation of rape: A historical survey of rape in U.S. film, 1903-1972. *Cinema Journal*, 41(1), 63-90.
- Reuters. (2014, January 29). Female politician says rape happens because of a woman's clothes. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/10604531/Female-Indian-politician-says-rape-happens-because-of-a-womans-clothes.html>
- Rizwan, S. (2015, March 4). *18 comments glorifying rape that have been broadcast in India* [Blog Post]. Retrieved from [https://www.buzzfeed.com/sahilirizwan/the-r-word?utm\\_term=.imgoA4wL7#.kdb2VLNg1](https://www.buzzfeed.com/sahilirizwan/the-r-word?utm_term=.imgoA4wL7#.kdb2VLNg1)
- "Rohtak gang rape". (2016, July 19). Rohtak gang rape: Haryana women commission records victim's statement. *Business Standard*. Retrieved from [http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/rohtak-gang-rape-haryana-women-commission-records-victim-s-statement-116071900911\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/rohtak-gang-rape-haryana-women-commission-records-victim-s-statement-116071900911_1.html)
- Sharma, S. (2017, November 8). Everyone blames me: barriers to justice and support services for sexual assault survivors in India. *Human Rights Watch*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/11/08/everyone-blames-me/barriers-justice-and-support-services-sexual-assault-survivors>
- Siddiqui, I.A. (2011, November 1). Shunned, raped Mizo girl quits Delhi-taunted by friends, BPO worker goes home. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from [https://www.telegraphindia.com / 1111101 / jsp/nation / story\\_14693129.jsp](https://www.telegraphindia.com / 1111101 / jsp/nation / story_14693129.jsp)
- Surendran, V. (2015, August 7). The strange relish India takes in shaming rape survivors [Blog Post]. Retrieved from <https://www.dailyo.in/politics/gujarat-village-40-kg-rock-shames-rape-survivors-indias-daughter/story/1/5525.html>
- Taub, A. (2015, March 5). She should just be silent: The real roots of India's rape culture [Blog Post]. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/2015/3/5/8156881/india-rape>

- Verma, A. (2018, January 9). Misogyny is the oldest Indian tradition [Blog Post]. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/talk/misogyny-is-the-oldest-indian-tradition/article9800756.ece>
- Verma, A. (2017, August 3). 10 bizarre statements made by Indian politicians that will make you facepalm hard. *News 18*. Retrieved from <http://www.news18.com/news/politics/10-bizarre-statements-made-by-indian-politicians-that-will-make-you-facepalm-hard-1481489.html>
- "5 decisions of khap panchayats". (2015, September 15). 5 decisions of khap panchayats that took us back to the dark ages [Blog Post]. Retrieved from <http://www.womensweb.in/2015/09/5-decisions-by-khap-panchayats-took-us-back-dark-ages/>

**Sakshi Singh** is a research scholar in the School of Languages and Literature at Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University, Katra, India. She is currently working on sexual violence against women.

**Dr. Anurag Kumar** is an assistant professor in the School of Languages and Literature at Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University. His research interests include African American literature, marginal spatial realities, *Dalit* literature, sexual violence against women, and transgender studies.