

Female Exploitation in *Notre Dame de Paris*

by Victor Marie Hugo

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Abstract The purpose of this study is to trace out different ways of exploitation of women. This study aims to examine *Notre Dame de Paris* (Translated as *Hunchback of Notre Dame* in English) which is structured on the consciousness of the general cultural suppression and exploitation of women in the Fifteenth Century France as portrayed by Victor Marie Hugo. Patriarchy subordinates women prescribing images and roles for them. This qualitative study makes an analysis of the female protagonist who is exploited in every sphere of life i.e. social, economic, psychological, sexual etc. and records how female exploitation has persisted as a continuous phenomenon. Through the discussion of the exploited character, the study brings awareness about the plight and existential rights of women.

Key words exploitation; patriarchy; identity; social prescription; existential rights

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Introduction

Women have been exploited across cultures and ages. The testimony of the Bible proves that the exploitation of women started with the very birth of Eve when she was created for the company of Adam and solely held responsible for their shared guilt of tasting from the tree of knowledge in the garden of Eden. Therefore Eve stood for desire, and the source of temptation for man. Sartori et al quote the views of St. Paul: "For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor" (xi).

Through history, women have been labeled physically weaker than men. They are considered more emotional, less reasonable, less able to learn, and dependent. Although responsible for instilling civic and religious virtue in children, they themselves have been seen as susceptible to sin. According to the *Encyclopedia Americana*, “Social customs and laws were developed to ensure that women fit these definitions. The occasional woman who did not conform was explained away or, more often, labeled a witch or a prostitute and punished” (111a). Traditionally, the gender roles are accepted by men and women alike, and consequently this fact is amenable for both that men have rights and women do not. The norms of society are set by male behavior and women are viewed as inferior. This social stereotyping shapes thinking about women and women’s behavior. In the worlds of classical Greece, Rome, and Egypt, women were stereotyped to bear and rear children or sold in bazaars like a commodity. The condition of the slave women was even worse. Their masters had sexual relationship with them. Their sign of identity was the label which distinguished them from their neighbour. “Still others were economically and sexually exploited” (Ency. Ameri. 111b).

In the Renaissance, a limited basic education was given to the daughters of elite families only but they were still exploited in other ways. They were given the doll image i.e. passive, submissive, entertaining and beautiful. This period marked an increase in the educational facilities on the one hand and a decrease of economic power and imposition of legal and moral restrictions on the other hand (Sartori et al xvi). So the Renaissance inaugurated another phase of legal and economic exploitation. The period from mid- fifteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries is notorious in history for the greatest exploitation and oppression against women in the form of witch hunting and a majority of women was condemned as the witches and punished with death or imprisonment (Ankerloo et al 44). In Victorian male chauvinistic society, women were compelled to accept either of the two roles assigned by men i.e. angel in the house as a conformist or the fallen woman as a deviant. Society purged itself by expelling such fallen women to other places. Men who were guilty of the same crime were free of any blame but women were stigmatized and ostracized by society (Clark 60). By contracting marriage bond, a woman gave up most of her social, legal, rights to her husband (Evans 58). Even Catholic church Portrayed women as sexual temptresses. There were double standards of morality in society that best suited the male majority (Clark 57-59). This stereotyping of women put them in service of men in all the roles.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the scenario for women has not changed as patriarchy still rules their life. In the Asiatic societies, when a daughter

grows up, she is subjected to all sorts of exploitation from forced marriage to sexual abuse in society. A grown up girl is a guest in the family who is soon to be seen off and her person and rights are shifted to her husband. Her role in society is predestined even before her birth.

Past portrays a thoroughly different picture when seen through the eyes of women. The way women interacted in society, struggled against the social ideology, resisted the patriarchal and gendered structures and the fact that most women's lives were structured by the ideology and the material reality of family and in this context how they carved out identities for them is part of the history of many centuries.

On the whole, women have been seen as deprived of subjectivity and therefore a suitable site for exploitation. Their roles and images are defined by patriarchy and it is believed that they have no identity other than what is prescribed by society. But this is only male perception of them. Their consciousness has gradually increased through ages as highly individualized beings contrary to their gender stereotyping. They are aware of their exploitation and display an acute desire to change their status in society.

Regarding Hugo's novel, no research has been done on *NDP (Notre Dame de Paris)* from female exploitation and regeneration perspective. Beaghton analyzes and compares archdeacon Frollo with Sand's priest Magnus but her research is focused on the psychological interpretation of these two lustful priests' character. Frollo forgets his priestly duties to sexually pursue Esmeralda and within the holy confines of the Notre-Dame cathedral itself, of which he is archdeacon, he attempts to rape her. Craven compares Hugo's Esmeralda with Disney's Esmeralda and calls the later an action heroin. Craven ignores the spirited struggle of Hugo's Esmeralda which makes her stand up to Frollo till her last moment. In this perspective, Yearsley's research is somewhat akin to my point of view but he discusses only the sexual obsession of Frollo. He appreciates her resolution and firmness to stand against Frollo, calling her a romantic heroine, someone who dies for her ideals and refuses to compromise. None of these critics have viewed Esmeralda from feministic point of view and made her the focal point of their research.

This study is an analysis of the female protagonist. It is designed on the qualitative pattern, in which the excerpts from the primary texts have been used as data, and secondary sources like critics' books, journals and web sources will consolidate my point and the existential feminist insight will be applied to orient my viewpoint side by side. My study assumes that society is patriarchal where super structures like religion, law, education and economy etc. are under male control.

Therefore in patriarchal societies women are marginalized and consequently exploited.

Analysis

Exploitation is a social relationship in which certain persons are used, mistreated or unjustly used for the benefit of others. Human beings are treated as a means to an end, as an object. This is a social relationship in which one person uses the other for his personal benefits. De Beauvoir investigates the ways through which women are exploited. She notes that woman is exploited through the lies of love, devotion and the gift of herself, and the fact is concealed from her that neither lover nor husband and not even children will come up to the expectation of taking the charge of all that. She also observes that the bond that unites a woman to her oppressor is not comparable to any other. Thus de Beauvoir sees patriarchy as an deeply embedded form of exploitation in society. *NDP* deals with the themes of exploitation and social injustice prevalent in France of the middle ages. Maurice comments on the city of Paris, and pens these words: “It is a far cry from that city of Quasimodo, and Claude Frollo and Esmeralda and captain Phoebus to the town of the eighteenth-seventies through which Robert Louis Stevenson so delighted to wander” and then ever conscious of the towering presence of the cathedral, remarks: “Hugo has peopled this gothic city, and, above all, this gothic church, with a race of men even more distinctly gothic than their surrounding” (216). So the social setup of the Fifteenth century France was very exploitative for women. Stephens calls Hugo a patriarchal figure whose greatness in poetry, drama, and prose is “matched by his authoritative defiance of political and social injustice...” (E447) and considers his nearly two-decade-long exile in the channel island during the second empire a manifestation of it. Lodeman also notes: “it cannot be denied that many single pieces and separate passages in his works possess a wonderful power and breathe the spirit of profound human sympathy” (101-102). In this article I have tried to find out the sort of injustice meted out to Esmeralda in society. I have also explored what are the different ways and tactics through which she is exploited.

Esmeralda is definitely one of the popular gypsies or Romani women in all literature. She is just a 16 years old girl who is journeying through this wicked world all alone as she does not know who her parents are. The first impression about her is that she is wrapped in mystery. The fact that she is a gypsy makes her an exotic other. The Medieval Parisian society had strange views about gypsies who were considered to be outsiders. They had mysterious misconceptions about their nativity, i.e. Egyptians, and about their involvement in activities like sorcery

and witchcraft. Pinsky discusses the scene in the Disney adaptation of the novel when Esmeralda helps the hunchback and is forced to flee into the church. “She asks the cleric why there is such disdain for people who are different . . . gypsies or hunchbacks” (169) and when the cleric replies that she cannot right all the wrongs of the world, but there is someone in the heavens who can, she walks “in the opposite direction of more prosperous worshippers who are praying for material and earthly rewards . . . gazing at a statue of Mary and baby Jesus, she asks for pity for outcasts like herself and her people . . . instead of wealth, fame, or love, the gypsy prays for mercy for the poor and the downtrodden, which are also the children of God” (169-170). Opera calls the Romani women a far cry from Victor Hugo’s “exotic gypsy seductress,” Esmeralda of *Hunchback of Notre Dame* who is a “voluptuous gypsy” and whose beauty, dance and charm attract the “fantasy of every European man”. According to her, “Romani women have been struggling to regain their dignity in the face of multi-faceted oppression, some of which comes in the form of the aforementioned example of racialized objectification, others in the form of the systematic denial of basic rights” (29). In this observation, she ignores the exploitation which Esmeralda has to face in the story. She is simultaneously pursued and hated not only by Frollo, but also by the whole Parisian society. But paradoxically, the only way she is acceptable in the community is through the entertainment she provides to the patriarchs in society. In Galens’ edition of *NDP* the status of the Roma is commented upon in these words: “Wherever they went, they were considered outsiders and were persecuted. Some countries enslaved them; others used them for entertainment, music and dancing being two of their gifts . . . even more severe, in great Britain, Queen Elizabeth 1 (1533-1603) actually signed a law that stated gypsies could be hanged just for being gypsies” (24). Despite her beauty and its attraction for men, she lives in the court of miracles, a dunghill of Parisian beggars. But whenever she comes out of this dunghill, she is pursued by Parisian males, particularly, Frollo, Phoebus and the likes attempt to possess and victimize her sexually.

The most prominent feature of her person is her extraordinary beauty and her dance which earn her not only coins but the attention of Claude Frollo and Pheobus as well. Particularly Frollo associates her beauty with the devil that is why he attempts either to possess or to destroy her. “Around her all eyes were fixed, all mouths agape: and as she danced, to the drumming of the tambourine she held above her head in her two pure, round arms, slender, frail, quick as a wasp, with her golden, unpleated bodice, her billowing brightly-coloured dress, her bare shoulders, her slender legs, uncovered now and again by her skirt, her black

hair, her fiery eyes, she was indeed a supernatural creature” (Hugo 82). Her being considered the other can be exemplified by Gringoire’s reaction on first meeting her, “‘Truly, thought Gringoir,’ it is a salamander, a nymph, a goddess, a bacchante from Mount Menalaus” (Hugo 82). Particularly, her dance at the feast of fools is the most significant element of her character construction. At a festivity when the whole community is enjoying themselves, she uses the moment to earn for her some coins. Though Zarranz in her analysis of Disney’s Esmeralda’s character calls this dance a moment “to participate in the carnival experience” (62) yet she is alive to the fact that this “exuberant young woman” (61) shows her dance “to earn a living” and while she is “enjoying her own sexuality” she is subsequently, “succumbing to male desire” (62). In this way, Zarranz links Esmeralda’s independent sexuality with her dependent economic needs. *NDP* sketches a capitalistic society, in which “All the poor of Paris are portrayed as having also been abandoned by the fabulously rich monarchy which has grown out of touch not only with needs of the poverty-stricken populous but with its subjects’ humanity” (Galens 16). Coca observes about Disney’s Esmeralda also that she is “the gypsy who earns money by dancing on the streets of Paris. She is identified from the start as an outcast, both due to her ethnicity and her lack of adherence to societal expectations” (11). For Esmeralda, her beauty and dancing skills are the commodities she barter with the males to earn a few coins for her survival. When in the beginning of the novel, the people rush out of the hall calling out the name Esmeralda (Hug 74), it is not out of love or admiration or even respect for her, it is because she is the cheapest maximum entertainment available. Thus the society of the *NDP* is an overwhelming patriarchal society where the males dominate, from the king who can issue orders to execute anyone who disagrees with him, to Phoebus who victimizes women through his masculine charms without caring for them in the least, to Frollo, who uses his religious influence to control the lives of Quasimodo and Esmeralda.

Religion is exploited to oppress some classes of society. In the novel, Claude Frollo is the archdeacon, who is enamoured by the beauty of Esmeralda, and wants to possess her. For this purpose, he uses all the authority he has as a church figure to pressurize Esmeralda. He gets her convicted as the murderess of Phoebus and proves her involved in witchcraft. Afterwards, he uses his influence to make her surrender to his lust. Even the novel’s Disney adaptations cannot ignore the role of religion in society. According to Hammond, Byrne and McMillan note the remarkable aspect of Wise & Trousdale’s Disney animation which makes it distinguished from other Disney ventures, i.e. it addresses continuous issues of organized religion within society, whereas Pinsky points out that “censorial decisions” were made to change

the identity of Frollo, the villain of the story. He observes that in 1996 version, Frollo is shown to be “a ruthless and unforgiving judge” instead of “a sadistic and unforgiving cathedral archdeacon” (2). Even the church, as it is portrayed in the novel, is not free from the dark aspects the society conveys. Brombert notes this element of the cathedral in the following words:

The cathedral, a stronghold of religion, seems an empty shell. It is almost everything: an architectural landmark, an observation tower, a fortress, a place of refuge. But it is not a place of worship . . . the religious edifice is not merely empty; it is downright threatening. Through the open portal, the length of the church looks like a cavern or the dark entrails of a mythological monster. The rose window, at once Cyclops’ eye and fateful spider, seems to cast an evil spell both outside and inside the cavernous space. A sepulchral light communicates to everything the complexion of death. It is as though the entire edifice were given over to evil practices. (65)

Cushman also points out how religion can be manipulated and engineered to meet human desires. Both in history and in current events religion has been and can be used to cause great harm. She further notes that there is within human beings not only the capacity to reflect the goodness and mercy of God, but the capacity to use God to justify their own unrighteous goals and attitudes. Claude Frollo is one such character who can use religion for his own dirty goals. He is the self righteous man who condemns and judges others. According to Cushman, the opening song of Disney’s *NDP* says he saw corruption everywhere except within himself. Frollo is the greatest hater of gypsies. In the movie version, he runs down a gypsy women suspecting her to have stolen a package. But when she falls dead on the steps of the Notre Dame, he finds out that the package is actually her deformed baby. Frollo is devoid of any human sympathy. Instead of repenting, he decides to drown the baby, but he is detained by the priest and is convinced to raise the baby as a penance (Cushman n.pag.). Similarly he wants to imprison Esmeralda in order to satisfy his lust. Pinsky calls Frollo “a priest and a hypocritical church official” (167) who accomplishes his evil designs under the garb of priestly cloak. He cites Wards’ words:

The association of the church with this kind of evil leadership implies a church that is ineffective if not full of vice . . . The very thing Hugo was criticizing in the original novel. Religion . . . Appears as an impotent, irrelevant caricature .

. . . By relegating the church, and more specifically God, to irrelevancy, Disney refuses to admit a serious role for religion. (168)

Though in the novel, church is presented in its true role as a sanctuary for the outcast, like Quasimodo and Esmeralda, the men of faith are not always true to this role as exemplified by Frollo. The message of the novel is quite clear: we should never use religion for serving our purposes and exploiting the people.

The most lamentable feature of *NDP* is its depiction of a defective legal system. The archdeacon Frollo gets La Esmeralda convicted as a witch through the exploitative legal system of his time, and pressurizes her to buy her life at the cost of her honor. The novel is remarkable for the oppressive patriarchal setting, the defective system of justice, the victimization of an innocent woman as a witch and her transformation through a process of crisis. E.H. and A.M. Blackmore cover the versatile work of Hugo and translate certain portions of his work that are representative of his art. Out of the voluminous novel, they highlight the chapter on the exploitative system of justice prevalent at the time which was vehemently satirized by Hugo in the novel (65-76). As I have earlier pointed out that the 15th century society was prejudicial towards gypsies. They were considered outsiders, and often they were persecuted, some countries made them slaves while others used them for music, dance and entertainment. If ever these luckless people happened to fall under the thumb of law, they were grievously maltreated by law. In the *NDP*, Esmeralda falls a victim to such a discriminative legal system which convicts her as a murderess and witch without ample evidence. *NDP* draws a detailed sketch of such a faulty system. It points out the huge privileges and salaries that these ministers of justice enjoy, still they fail to administer justice. Particularly, it discusses the role of Messire Robert d'Estouteville, who had not only his own judicial authority, but had a share in the king's high justice. Each head, before falling in the hands of the public executioner, passed through his hands, "And yet, with all these reasons for taking life patiently and cheerfully, Messire Robert d'Estouteville had woken up on the morning of 7 January 1482, in a sore head and in a murderous temper" (Hugo 205). It was under this ominous bad mood that first the fate of Quasimodo and then Esmeralda fell. Quasimodo was punished undeservedly for kidnapping Esmeralda and Esmeralda was convicted as murderess and witch whereas behind both these crimes the figure of Claude Frollo as the perpetrator of crimes looms large. Moore points out: "In the novel, while la Esmeralda is arrested on a charge of stabbing Phoebus, she is actually convicted under a fifth century law against night vampires, which Victor Hugo found recorded

in Collin de Plancy's *Dictionnaire Infernal*" (261). The lives of the poor and down-trodden were threatened with severe punishments in Paris where "at the end of each path you could immediately see the wheel, gallows or pillory" (Hugo 212).

Esmeralda's sexuality is wholly defined, controlled and exploited by patriarchy in *NDP*. She is the beautiful young girl who is envied even by the young girls of elite class like Fleur de Lys and her friends (Hugo 252). The way she laughs, moves and dances, fascinates the onlookers. The novel begins with a lot of commotion. There is the feast of the fools, where parties and plays and celebrations are being held. As Esmeralda makes her first appearance, everyone is attracted to her. Her beauty and innocence captivate their hearts. She is a pearl on the dunghill, living among the beggars and reputed for her beauty, singing and dancing among the Parisians. Esmeralda's femininity and sexuality is a matter of controversy among the critics. Zarranz points to this aspect when she writes: "In this respect, the construction of Disney's heroines has become a controversial site for discussion in terms of stereotyped femininity and sexuality following the demands of a pervasive patriarchal system" (55). In his analysis of Disney heroines, Lacroix comments on the physical aspects of Esmeralda:

Esmeralda, the darkest in skin tone of all the characters, reflects the trend toward increasing emphasis on physical maturity and sexuality. Although smaller in frame than Pocahontas, Esmeralda retains the athleticism and strength of the previous character. She is also frequently shot in active sequences that emphasize the physical rather than the delicate frame that we see particularly in Belle. Like Pocahontas, Esmeralda appears voluptuous when compared to Ariel and Belle. She, like Pocahontas appears to be a woman, not a girl. Her eyes and hair are highlighted in the shots as in the iconography of Pocahontas. Esmeralda's physique and activity appears to be the culmination of a pattern toward increasing physical maturation and strength in the films that seems to position the characters on a spectrum of activity and sexual/physical maturation where the white women occupy the least active and mature bodies, whereas the women of color are represented as both physically mature and athletic. (221)

Again the critic refers to the attractiveness of Jasmine of Alladin which in case of Esmeralda, "resurface(s) in a more virulent form in the *Hunchback of Notre Dame*" (224).

In *NDP*, Claude Frollo is the evil character who wants to control Esmeralda's

sexuality. He is shown to be a man of dual nature. On the one hand, he is a priest of the church; on the other hand, he is the most lustful character. Yearsley investigates the reasons behind this duality of his character and proves him “as a desexualized, implying the potential for sexual reawakening. He is directed into priesthood by his parents, a quasi-castration not of his choosing. By stifling his sexuality, this “imposed celibacy” (4) is channelized into other avenues of expression like alchemy and astronomy, “and so when Frollo becomes obsessed with La Esmeralda, all the traits which he has thus far applied to science, he applies to the conquest of the gypsy” (5). He maintains, “What Frollo truly desires . . . (is) sex” (4). He proves that this desire is present from the very beginning of his narrative, but it “becomes evident once he begins lusting after La Esmeralda” (4).

As I have proved, the driving force behind Frollo is lust. While Quasimodo, the ugly hunchback loves her truly, Frollo’s passion and obsession is only a carnal desire burning to be fulfilled. He “invades La Esmeralda’s privacy and forces her constantly on the show . . . while Frollo obviously wants La Esmeralda to reciprocate his affections . . . Quasimodo is sensitive to her own feelings, telling her not to look at him if his ugliness perturbs her” (Yearsley 7).

De Beauvoir has traced love, devotion and the gift of herself as the main motives behind the exploitation of women. According to Barnet, *NDP* conveys a strong consciousness about the power of love as in this novel Esmeralda is exploited by male exploiters in the name of love. So love is also a mode of Esmeralda’s exploitation. Esmeralda’s innocent love for Phoebus, Frollo’s sexual love for Esmeralda and Quasimodo’s pure and almost divine love for Esmeralda intricate them into a complex web of emotions. She notes that Hugo presents idealized vision of love between a man and a woman but he also discusses the frightening quality of passion and love’s potential which may lead to tragedy. She remarks: “Hugo celebrates the passionate sensuality of love, and examines the powerfully uncontrollable nature of sex and how passion provoked by sexuality can become a deadly obsession” (37). This is Archdeacon Frollo’s deadly obsession which leads him to sexually harass Esmeralda when she refuses to surrender to his lascivious desire for her.

Esmeralda is exploited in the name of love. Therefore here I can also make a comparison between the types of love expressed towards Esmeralda, i.e. sensual love and pure love. Although Phoebus and Frollo are poles opposite from each other, still they are similar in one respect, their base and carnal longing for Esmeralda. Phoebus’ desire is shallow, fleeting and momentary as he wants instant gratification of his desire. He wants to exploit Esmeralda as he has exploited and

used many other women. It is quite paradoxical that a pure and innocent soul like Esmeralda should be so blinded and find her ideal of love in the person of a shallow and flirtatious coxcomb. Hart comments on this foible in Esmeralda's character:

La Esmeralda has her own Achilles heel, her own point of weakness. She desires a perfect love. And her definition of perfect love comes to her in the form of Phoebus, a vain, shallow soldier, whose own beauty inflates his ego and overshadows his heart. Whether it is the handsomeness of this king's archer that captivates La Esmeralda or it is his rank, the young gypsy woman cannot see beyond what she thinks he is to the real dangers that he presents. (31)

Esmeralda is chaste and protective of her purity. But at one point she also yields to Phoebus' carnality convincing herself that the playboy Phoebus cared for her. Her succumbing to his sensual lust and dropping her guard is only a proof of how much she longed for his affection and that she did not want to lose him. The scene only proves that men are ever ready to exploit women's insecurities.

The other identical passion is that of Frollo. His desire is also sensual but it is more enduring, more consuming and relentless as it destroys not only Esmeralda but Frollo also. The first time he sets his eyes on Esmeralda, his being is torn into two. He has the conflicts of passion and duty. Hart discusses the effects of this carnal desire:

Frollo melts at the sight of La Esmeralda. He not only is affected by her beauty, his passion for her controls his behavior. La Esmeralda has turned this great angel of intellect into a devil of lust. Because of his need of her, Frollo will abuse Quasimodo and will attempt to assassinate his rival Phoebus. He will lie, cheat, and scheme. (31)

Opposed to this is the pure love of Quasimodo for Esmeralda. His love for her is more spiritual than physical. The way he rescues her from being hanged, his day-night vigil to protect her against her oppressor, his final fight to save her and the final scene in which the skeletons of Quasimodo and La Esmeralda lie in an eternal embrace (Hugo 492), all prove his pure love for her. "Now a subject, in control of his life, Quasimodo is able to answer a question which pervades *Notre-Dame de Paris*. How should we love? It is obvious that the type of love expressed by Frollo, which is brooding, objectifying and obsessive, is an inadequate answer. Likewise,

the non-love that Phoebus exhibits towards everyone but himself cannot appeal to the romantic” (Yearsley 8).

Conclusions

The above analysis proves that women face social, economic and sexual exploitation. Society is synonymous with male hegemony. It is exploitative and discriminative. If women are outcast and unprivileged in society, they have no respect. In society they are viewed as the other and the insignificant. They are socially and economically exploited on the basis of their ethnicity, class and race. If they are the member of the working class, they are doubly exploited as they are the member of an already gendered class. Economic exploitation finally leads to her sexual exploitation. This is indicative of the fact how much economic independence is desirable for women. Women are themselves commoditized sometimes.

Society uses its super structure to victimize women. In this context, religion and law serve as cat’s paw to exploit women and threaten them into subordination. Law also provides no satisfactory compensation for the injustice done to women as it involves the danger of public humiliation and exposure, which is disadvantageous to women only. Women are exploited psychologically as well. Women are easily entrapped and exploited through the protestations of love. Sense of duty and sacrifice are inculcated in their nature. Patriarchs misuse them to psychologically blackmail women.

Women’s sexuality is the site where male hegemony reigns supreme. It extends from the exploitation of their physical charms to the actual control of their sexuality through sexual harassment, rape and forced marriages.

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