

Feminist Perspective in Roop Bajwa's *The Sari Shop*

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Abstract: *Feminist enterprise has been so far a long struggle to universalise female behaviour, focusing common tales of woe and sufferings under realms of patriarchy and male oppression. Nowhere have women been set against women; only men have been peeled, chopped and even roasted in certain instances. In Indian context, the fashion in writing and criticism pertains to this nouveau feminism in vocal, visual and literary form. Roopa Bajwa, the young brave girl from Amritsar has dared set in a different viewpoint with her text *The Sari Shop*. The delineated female characters in *The Sari Shop* are better halves of someone rich and famous or somebody affluent and known. They are no entities in themselves. Bajwa has called them all Mrs. Sachdeva/ Kapoor/ Bhandari/ Gupta. They have no name and identity of their own. It is all borrowed from husband's hierarchy and tradition. The class solidarity among opulent group of Mrs. Sandhu, Mrs. Sachdeva, Mrs. Kapoor type is empowered by class consciousness which they feel and generate by ignominious and condescending values to 'have-nots'. *The Sari Shop* explains the meaning of existence in spheres of capitalism, chaos and conflict, when women themselves have fallen a prey to consumerism. The gynocentric view is made complete by shooting arrows not only in the direction of men, but also women who are mimicked for their false Anglo-rational feminist ideals, adored and adopted so naturally, only to turn deaf to the cries of a marginalised soul for help. A woman is oppressed by women for their tacit understanding of not understanding her plight. This paper is a humble attempt to provide a better study lies in giving micro attention to axis of social constructs intertwined with gender and synthesising feminist dogmas with socio-cultural dimensions.*

Key Words: *Feminism, Class Consciousness, Class Struggle, Patriarchy, Oppression.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Feminist enterprise has been so far a long struggle to universalise female behaviour, focusing common tales of woe and sufferings under realms of patriarchy and male oppression. Be it a question of rewriting of male texts or parametering of social structure, the set pattern of feminist view point has been struggle against androcentric ethics and female sensitivity in bonding, analysing and understanding each other universally. Nowhere have women been set against women; only men have been peeled, chopped and even roasted in certain instances.

THE SARI SHOP:

In Indian context, the fashion in writing and criticism pertains to this nouveau feminism in vocal, visual and literary form. Roopa Bajwa, the young brave girl from Amritsar has dared set in a different viewpoint with her text *The Sari Shop*. The title itself is a poignant symbol of Indian womanhood and all traditional and modern idiosyncrasies associated with it. This is Roop Bajwa's debut work, and she bangs in a time when Jhumpa Lahiri, Shani Mootoo, Anita Nair and other young brigade is all over the scene. But she has a different identity of a small town like Amritsar, an image like Sari to unfurl, and a separate story than an immigrant culture tale, and another woman to portray an Indian woman, a wounded woman, a raped woman, a woman who dares against women, woman who assumes the status of an actual heroine/ role model when she pulls down glitters from fabrics of rich and suave feminist minds by poking fun at their miserableness of being hollow inside. Bajwa has presented in all its nakedness the common psychic inheritance of Indians regarding women and the psychic makeup of women in general. The continuous assessment all over the world has been of women as important as men but there has been no evaluation of women's position in society with other women. The enigma of plural societies like India, which face more social, political and cultural cleavages, is complex and uneasy to differentiate.

The feminisation of media, especially T. V., has brought a new cult of upper middle class bourgeois woman, obliterating our minds of the crude statistics of women facing unto untouchability, oppression, below poverty line (BPL status), unemployment graphs, illiteracy or ignorance factors, rising suicide, molestation, violence, rape, etc. The embellished make-believe world has bypassed our awareness of internal and external social system in terms of caste, creed, race, colour, ethnicity and religion. Though class in Indian context is not a new signifier, but is the Indian writer in English especially woman writer, aware of inter-class struggle, class division, class oppression, class consciousness and class solidarity among themselves? The uniformity of biological status among women can't ignore rational, social, political and economic differences, where she is a different class from the other. So there are 'fault lines' emerging among perceived feminist notions and theories, the fancied 'equality manifesto' not with men but with women in general seems itself 'unequal' in theory and reality. *The Sari Shop* is a work where representations of different Indian women are given due analysis on the basis of numerous hybrid and heterogeneous class groups. The rationalisation of status and class adds to discrimination between men and women and is discussed in terms of dominant and subordinate category.

The delineated female characters in *The Sari Shop* are better halves of someone rich and famous or somebody affluent and known. They are no entities in themselves. Bajwa has called them all Mrs. Sachdeva/ Kapoor/ Bhandari/ Gupta. They have no name and identity of their own. It is all borrowed from husband's hierarchy and tradition. The feminist concern should embark on this hired 'image-identity bargain' of upper-upper class woman. For Kamla, the drunk, mad, ruffian Sari Assistant Chander's wife, the title is not Mrs. Chander anywhere but Chander's wife or that charred Kamla, 'the mad woman in the attic' kind.

2. GALLERY OF FEMALE CHARACTERS:

Bajwa introduces a gallery of female characters, all distinct and apart in style, language, mannerism, ideology and in particular how they choose a sari, admire its texture, colour and fabric and fancy it wearing them. Mrs. Sandhu, wife of a chief engineer in Punjab State Electricity Board, epitomizes 'power psychology' "as her rolls of fat jiggled as she waddled" into her spotless house, furnished with latest gadgetry and fashionable architectural feature. Her picture-perfect frame is summed up as a "beautiful house, status family, a caring husband and good looks. . . what more could a woman ask for?" (13).

Mrs. Gupta, the wife of a wealthy industrialist, sits in her bedroom on a large bed covered with a peach satin bedspread, reminding of the "burnished throne" (A Game of Chess, *The Wasteland*, T. S. Eliot). Her unusual, 'perky' and 'over-confident' manner smelled through her room beaming of various Lo'Real cosmetics, Lakme, and her recent venture with Feng Shui, establishes her as another consumerist character.

Mrs. Sachdeva, Head of the English Department at a local college, "liked to look plain and business like". She felt she "wasn't one of the idle housewives that this city was so full of. She was a 'literate woman' after all" (33).

Mrs. Bhandari, wife of the DIG of Police, who took pride in calling herself a 'social activist', spoke perfect English, had an unerring taste in clothes and any party that she organised was bound to be a success. Hers is another straw, brilliantly sketched by Bajwa.

And then rich Ravinder Kapoor's wife and daughter, who had at one go, bought pashmina shawls worth ten lakhs, had enough of money and poise to astonish any millionaire in the town.

The personal likings and dislikings of women also rest on these social gimmicks. Mrs. Kapoor dislikes Mrs. Sachdeva, 'the ordinary professor-type service class' woman, coming to their mansioned house. Mrs. Sandhu finds Mrs. Bhandari 'snooty', maybe because 'her English is so good', but her heaven of peace lies in the fact that 'Bhandaris are certainly not very rich and have only daughter still not married'.

The social nature of women is exposed in the eyes of Ramchand at times by the narrator, sufferer and omniscient observer with critical eye of a psychologist who peeps into their minds, hypocrisies, values and lifestyle for "he had seen envy, he had seen despair. He knew well the bitterness of a plain woman wordless triumph of the beautiful ones" (63).

He finds in Mrs. Kapoor a "certain ruthlessness in the way she picked up a sari, ran a sharp eye, over it and had glint in eyes before making up her mind". Among the various sari images created by the author, the image used in describing women of different classes picking up the right sari is amazing to see. And in all these cases, Ramchand is made to observe and feel the things, sometimes with Prufrockian uneasiness and sometimes with moralising of Tiresias.

Mrs. Sachdeva, the literate woman, Head of an English Department, likes dull colours in choosing a sari, symbolic of her argument to stay apart from homogenisation with other females. The gorgeously decked up Rina Kapoor as bride dazzles Ramchand with her laughter the way she sweeps the marble staircase regally with her bridal outfit leaves him spellbound.

3. THE IMAGERY OF SARI:

The sari imagery reflects both beauty and ugliness of life, real and reel. The 'rust red, blood red stains on Kamla's purple sari' and vomit stains on her blouse after her rape and violence become a profound motive for Ramchand to avenge her wrong. The Sari image is convulsed, decontrolled and deconstructed with masterly superbness and intensity of pathos. After Kamla's death, the place inside the sari shop turned claustrophobic and grave, saris flew out at Ramchand whipping around 'engulfing him like a shroud', its black border suffocating him as if correcting him to take stock of situation and bear the burden of a saviour, a role which nature had imposed on him.

Marxist/ socialist feminism rest on the creed of woman as tertiary consumer and primary producer in society, be it producing offspring in the womb or cooking and cleaning or reproducing and writing. The theorization and over-theorization has destabilised the whole system of study and epistemology, regarding women. The debate has rested more on patriarchy in every form and subordination of woman by it. Women's rights, demands and desires have reverberated all the corners by now. Rape, violence, prejudice and household inequities have become highly contested issues among women on behalf of women. The cumulative effect of publicising deficiency in social system for deprived women by affluent and economic advancement by few has generated a 'cultural lag' between the two in which the basic values are eroded or changed for two groups and practically even in the name of feminism no cultural and intellectual inter-mixing is viable.

All this is an onslaught of global capitalist consumerist culture on Indian scene in the light of Roop Bajwa's *The Sari Shop*, which is a fine mimicking of welfare feminism. The class solidarity among opulent group of Mrs. Sandhu, Mrs. Sachdeva, Mrs. Kapoor type is empowered by class consciousness which they feel and generate by ignominious and condescending values to 'have-nots'. *The Sari Shop* explains the meaning of existence in spheres of capitalism, chaos and conflict, when women themselves have fallen a prey to consumerism. In the words of Ramchand, the shop assistant, "Life was grubby, clumsy, mean, flabby and meaningless. . . sick, sick, sick" (111) enough to remind 'Burning, Burning, Burning' of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*.

The sari of Indian woman is exploited maximum as a potent metaphor, a vehicle for all kinds of feminine expression. Sari is a symbol of womanhood and courtesy, but it also constrains women's movements and gait, providing a negative implication of concept and *The Sari Shop* would be a fit and plausible metaphor of restricted and reserved life, compartmentalised thoughts, associated with various women groups, a fine camouflage behind which all the actual selves remain mystified. Hordes of women visited it daily, some as a part of routine activity, which ended in cheap shopping bout at the sari shop, some for weddings and parties, some need not visit; they could pedal saris; some like Kapoors or some occasional visits by sombre lecturers like Mrs. Sachdeva etc. The idiosyncrasies and oddities of women in choosing a sari or touching it brings out their common shared shopping idiocy. The pervading tone of buying, bargaining and spending induces a bizarre sentiment of meaninglessness in life, which Ramchand feels as "Money, Congestion and noise danced an eternal, crazy dance here together, leaving no moving space for other gentler things" (5).

The remarkable thing is why only Ramchand, the traditionally unfair male protagonist, is forced into the situation, to save, revolt and protest, moved by the helplessness and misery of the rape victim. For, it is Ramchand who instead of getting numbed by social pressure and worldliness, remarks "What constant injustice! What a warped way of living! How wrong it all was! He felt reckless, strong enough to do anything, fight anyone for justice, for truth" (222).

Ramchand chooses to narrate Kamla's story for 'more importantly they were women', are enraged by 'the whole ugly, sordid, jigsaw story'. This breakdown of gynocentric world in which women can't live in perfect harmony and friendship with each other for their double standards or sub-standards is alarming! Mrs. Sachdeva pushes away the Saris on her lap and speaks with clenched teeth, "I don't want to listen to all that rubbish again that too in Hindi . . . How dare you . . . tell me filthy stories about the kind of women you seem to know" (101). Thus, women overdo and cut each other to size, especially the pearl-faced, upper-upper intelligentsia who find bonding with women of their class only, and not with women of Ramchand's social class type.

4. CONCLUSION:

The gynocentric view is made complete by shooting arrows not only in the direction of men, but also women who are mimicked for their false Anglo- rational feminist ideals, adored and adopted so naturally, only to turn deaf to the cries of a marginalised soul for help. A woman is oppressed by women for their tacit understanding of not understanding her plight. Kamla is belied, betrayed and berated by class of her own sex, whereas a lone male cries for her existence, her voice, emotion and identity. Kamla, the wronged, robbed, and raped woman, becomes a symbol and prototype of emancipation and individuality, though she says and does things theatrically in a schizophrenic manner, but it is the will of weaker woman, which overrules the highhandedness of social ladies. The quagmire of assaults she bears throws a neon light on abyss of women's agony at the hands of women, envisioning true feminists to embark on a revolutionary struggle in terms of class conflict among women. Thus, a better study lies in giving micro attention to axis of social constructs intertwined with gender and synthesising feminist dogmas with socio- cultural dimensions.

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