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## **Socio-Economic Issues Concerning Transformation of Characters in Rupa Bajwa's "*Tell Me a Story* ": A Marxist Approach**

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### **Abstract:**

The economic status of people is crucial in determining their social life and relations with other people is the popular viewpoint of Marxist critics. Rupa Bajwa's novel '*Tell Me a Story*' addresses social issues in contemporary India where a lower middle class family strives hard to survive in a competitive world. The present paper attempts to explore the transformation of characters in a world where social forces are dominant and commanding. Caught in a financial crunch, the lower middle class family of Rani has to approve social decorum and propriety. Their battle to come up to the expectations and standards of society triggers events which reshape and transform not only their lives but their perceptions also. Those who attempt to deviate from the stereotype or approved standards meet criticism. In this constant struggle for survival, the fragile threads binding human relations tend to break away.

**Keywords:** working class, social life, economic status, accepted behaviour, struggle, survival

The German philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883) was primarily a theorist, historian, and an economist, who perceived human history as a series of class struggles. Marxist critics who study literature as a reflection of the social institutions from which they originate, base their writings on the theories of socialism propounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marxist critics focus on the relationship between cultural practices and economic conditions of people in a society. The material life and economic status of people effect their social relations. Marxist critics believe that the productive forces and relations of production form the economic base which engenders different social institutions such as education, law, politics, family and aesthetic ideas. The institutions and beliefs arising out of the base are called superstructure of the society. They also believe that the base influences the superstructure. As Karl Marx puts it,

"The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their social existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."(Political Economy)

The practices of economically powerful class serve as the standards which the subordinate classes strive to follow. The beliefs and practices of dominant class are termed as Culture." Economic realities remain the base upon which the superstructure of culture is built." (Text 80). The language, mannerisms and lifestyle of dominant class serve as the standards. The economically powerful class circulates these standards in the form of popular culture that the lower order or working classes struggle to achieve. Karl Marx says,

"The ideas of ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas,i.e the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production"(German Ideology)

Rupa Bajwa's novels '*The Sari shop*' (2004) and '*Tell me a story*' (2012) present picture of urban India honestly and profoundly. Both the novels are set in Amritsar, her hometown in Punjab. In '*The Sari shop*' she juxtaposes two different classes of society and exposes snobbery, hypocrisy and hollowness of high middle class and trauma and struggle of working class for survival. The characters of two different worlds meet at one platform that is Sevak Sari Shop. The salesmen belong to the struggling world and the customers who are rich ladies of business and service class live in luxury and superficiality.

The second novel '*Tell me a Story*' which has been taken for present study chiefly deals with the struggle of working class. The troubles and tribulations of Rani's family amidst financial difficulties make their family life traumatic and tragic. Their misery is mainly caused by the dearth of money and partly because of their futility in coming to terms with the accepted social behaviour, fear of being caught in social stigma, their constant effort of becoming good enough in their social circle. The characters in the novel emerge as the product of social forces but also keep their distinctive characteristics and accordingly they choose their course of action. As we trace the incidents and events in their life we discover them as familiar characters of contemporary urban India struggling against current forces.

Rani, the protagonist of the novel works in a beauty parlour to contribute to their meagre family income. She is passionately in love with her family where she respects and obeys her brother (Mahesh)and bhabhi (Neelam),adores papaji (Dheeraj) and is obsessively fond of her nephew (Bittu).She enjoys her work in the beauty parlour, helps Neelam in household chores, tells bedtime stories to Bittu. Like a naive and innocent girl she's fond of nail polishes and cheap jewellery. She is amazingly in love with Sharukh Khan, watches popular Bollywood movies, relishes Filmfare magazine although she barely understands the content but photographs. She takes Bittu for excursions and enjoys street food with him.

Rani's family has already suffered severe setbacks and bore the brunt of economic growth and urbanization which many a time put an end to the livelihood of working class. Here, we find unequal distribution of economy where the rich are becoming more and more rich and poor are becoming more and more poor. Dheeraj, Rani's father is a victim of such apathy of the system. Being kicked out of his job after thirty two years of diligent service is nothing less than inhuman and unjustified. He worked as an accountant in a general store in Guru Bazaar and a supermarket came up there. He wasn't given even a month's notice. Dheeraj's sacking came as a twin blow to the family as Mahesh, who inspired to be an electrician, had to quit his electrical training half way to work in a dingy shawl factory which he found dull and monotonous and could never feel happy after that. Dheeraj often takes shelter in religious sermons but Mahesh speaks the blatant truth. When Dheeraj preached the family the teachings of Vivekanand that to consider oneself weak is a sin, Mahesh is infuriated and said,

"What does it even mean? How is my thinking that I am not weak going to help my soul? or my stomach? No matter what I make myself think, Charan Das is not weak, and I am weaker than them and I always will be." (Tell 22-23)

Charan Das who belongs to the capitalist society is Mahesh's employer. Mahesh speaks the practical truth that people belonging to capitalist society will remain powerful and workers like him will always be slaves and weak. Thinking will not help as money gives power to a person in this world. He pours his heart out about their social status and exhorts Dheeraj to come out of his illusory world.

"Look around. Open your eyes. All this you speak and utter is rubbish. You want to know the truth? The only truth I know is that there are big men and there are small men. And there are such minuscule, tiny men that they are not even there. Zero Men. Right now we are the small men. But there is just this much,' Mahesh held up his hand and made a tiny space between thumb and forefinger, ' just this much stopping us from becoming those invisible, minuscule men who die quietly in misery. The Zero men .There is a thin line on which we are tottering right now. And you can't even see that! One has to fight to survive.'" (23)

Rupa Bajwa presents Dheeraj as a representative of majority of Indian population working in the private sector who face financial instability in their career in spite of the dedicated and committed service. Such victims fall into depression and career of their children is ruined. Even the institutions of State meant for the so called upliftment of the poor are in a pathetic state. Rani, a drop out from the school, has bitter experience of school life. She studied in a government school for girls where she could not continue her studies after ninth as its dull and hackneyed

approach could not attract Rani. Not only the infrastructure of school is poor and inadequate but the teaching is also insipid. Rani's talent for storytelling could get no recognition at school. The novelist explains Rani's experience at school

"Rani had hated her school -the prison-like iron gates, the dilapidated building, their grim little classroom with the walls whitewashed a dirty pistachio green, the creaking fan that seldom worked, leaving the girls and the teacher sweltering and perspiring through most of the summer. The classroom smelt of sweat, chalk, and cheap talcum powder."

It depicts the scene of contemporary society where the poor remains bereft of education for either it is dull and insipid or out of reach and inaccessible for them. Quality education is available to the privileged class only whereas subordinate class feels pressurised to follow dominant culture. Neelam nags Bittu for not being able to learn English words. "Not a single word of English do you know. All those children at big convent schools can chatter in English at your age, and look at you."(5)

Economic stability and following of accepted behaviour were the two objectives that Rani's family targeted on. If making both ends meet was their constant struggle, following of beliefs and practices -ideology of dominant class and not deviating from the accepted behaviour were their constant fears. The questions of social disgrace and dishonour hang over more on the lower middle class as compared to the rich and the utterly poor. As Dheeraj treads the unconventional path by visiting Golden temple, pir baba and chapels in spite of the fact that he belonged to an orthodox Hindu family, he has to face the wrath of society. His neighbours and relatives scorn his broadmindedness when they saw him eating with beggars.

Fear of financial insecurity and shame of social impropriety are the two major forces that mars the atmosphere of Rani's family. The initial insults and offences arising from the constant bickerings and squabbles turns into deep wounds. The happy atmosphere of their house turns sour as over the years Neelam has become more vocal. Dheeraj is often nagged for unnecessary expenditure of using bulb in daylight. Rani was also scolded at the beauty parlour along with other girls for the hefty bill that the owner of the parlour had to pay. These incidents were bringing a change in Rani and she was gaining maturity and becoming more and more serious. "Rani suddenly felt that her world was constructed of fluttering, printed, accusing electricity bills, with last dates to pay stamped on them on red".(39)

The tense atmosphere of the home weighs heavily on Rani's mind and transforms her from a bubbly and vibrant girl to a serious girl always brooding over the complexities of life. Rani's bashfulness was giving way to a gloominess which overpowered her mind. She was working hard at the parlour and was always dead tired when she reached home. Even then she

could not get a sigh of relief, a peaceful life. Once on her way back she bought earrings, which in Neelam's eyes was unnecessary expenditure, Rani felt hurt- "Her feet ached after the long day and she felt a pricking of tears at the corner of her eyes."(46)

Economic conditions effect the growth of characters and determine their course of action in the novel. Serious troubles started in Rani's family when Dheeraj lent his savings to his friend's son, feeling obliged for his friend's help in the past. His generosity shocked Neelam and she imagined Bittu's future totally insecure and ruined. Giving vent to her feelings she scolded Bittu by saying- "You will end up on the streets.It isn't as if somebody is saving for your future.It isn't as if you are going to get some inheritance"(58). Troubled by adverse circumstances Neelam plans to arrange a Shuddhi Havana to ward off all negativity. Dheeraj discloses her plan attending a ten day course at Dharamshala and Neelam started lashing at him.

"The elders in other houses are the backbone of their families. . . . You just fritter away money on strangers, embarrass us by worshipping at this mosque, going to that baba, even visiting churches. You don't bother to keep an eye on what is being spent where, and use the night bulbs and fans as if we get electricity for free."(65)

The tension in the house effected Rani and she felt fatigued and listless to go to work. It lessened her usual joys and she started disliking Mahesh and Neelam. With her father's deteriorating health, her worries and anxieties increased and her simple pleasures and joys, her bubblyness decreased. Dheeraj, a reticent person was falling in the clutches of depression.

"Rani could feel that the atmosphere in their home had changed. It had become permanently strained, charged, as if anything could give way at any moment. Mahesh spent less and less time at home. Dheeraj tried to retain normalcy but his face showed the strain within. Neelam, who had always been given to veiled remarks, would now openly lash out at any of them, remaining morose for rest of the day, eating listlessly and very little".(78)

Tension in the house was transported to its climax as their house got flooded because of a pipe burst. Recently-bought a month's ration got soaked and many items were ruined. It was a hellish and chaotic experience for them scooping out water from every corner. The sudden expenditure shook the budget of their home. Moreover, recently there have been power cuts at the mill where Mahesh works and the workers get paid nothing when there are power cuts. A fear of insecure future of their son Bittu always loomed up ahead of Mahesh and Neelam. "I have nightmares,' Mahesh said, 'of Bittu spending his life in an airless, lightless factory working power looms. I want to have enough to educate him. And this how we are going about it?'"(98)

Rupa Bajwa has delineated characters of lower middle class as helpless and vulnerable beings of society. Effected by their socio-economic forces they behave accordingly and choose their course of action. Placed in a competitive world, they feel insecure and economic instability makes the survival difficult. Rani emerges as the most sensible, responsible and considerate character of the novel. She persuaded Dheeraj for a checkup at Dr. Bhatia's clinic. She took leave from parlour, waited for several hours but the attempt was futile as Bhatia came late and left without seeing Dheeraj.

The novelist presented a despondent picture of contemporary India where there has been an unprecedented advancement in the field of medical science but the common men and poor cannot avail its benefits. Health security is available to handful of people only. The poor cannot think of any treatment other than emergencies. Dheeraj who devotedly served a firm for thirty years, was kicked out of his job and died unattended and his disease undiagnosed.

Rani noticed superficiality of society as she gained maturity. When Dheeraj died relatives thronged their house. The women were wailing and beating their chests. There were pretensions of grief from everyone who never cared when Dheeraj was depressed and fighting with his demons. "The relatives surrounding the burning pyre had reminded Rani of the joyful, jeering crowds that had watched poor Ravan burn." ( 118) Social pretensions seemed ridiculous when a distant relative rebuked Rani for wearing pink colour on the fourth day of mourning and could not gauge the illimitable grief deep down in Rani's heart.

Financial constraints make the marriage of a daughter a nightmarish experience for working class. It is considered a big responsibility of which they want to be relieved as soon as possible. In working class it is more often than not an arranged marriage, to an unknown person. It is heart rending for a girl to hear of her marriage plan in that tone. Rani overhears the planning of her marriage as if she was a burden to be removed, an evil spirit to be warded off. Neelam considered her a bad influence on Bittu. Rani could not believe her ears. She loved her family above anything, passionately loved and cared Bittu.

"This was his brother with whom she had made mud cakes in the same courtyard outside. The bhabhi she used to hug every morning. And Bittu, her precious little Bittu. She remembered when he had been born, Rani had taken it upon herself to take utmost care of the mother and the baby. She had bathed him, dressed him, rocked him to sleep in her arms, and as he grew up, she had covered his notebooks with the mandatory brown paper at the start of every academic year. Every Sunday she had massaged his head with coconut oil, she had taught him multiplication tables, played and laughed with him. They had eaten together, slept together and watched television together. He was her friend, her companion, her baby. And she was supposed to be a bad influence on him? What had she done."

They want to marry her off to a person who has drinking habit just to hold up their heads in the society. Shocked by their behaviour she plans to leave her house and moves to Delhi. Marriage of a girl in such families remain a financial burden whereas the rich have enough money to squander on such occasions. The subordinate class feels pressurized to follow the practices of dominant class. Bajwa in her other novel 'The Sari Shop' depicted a luxurious, extravagant marriage of the daughter of Kapoors, an affluent business family. It was a different world where a girl marries a groom of her own choice, talks and shares with him, gets designer clothes from Bombay. The marriage party was a grand affair in which forty desserts were served in the dinner. The description of marriage depicts the wide chasm dividing the two diverse worlds of Indian society. "Guests were being welcomed with a sprinkling of rose water. . . . Chandeliers sparkled at you when you looked up. . . Flowers had been strung around everywhere. . . . A makeshift water fountain completed the decor". (Sari,130)

In the odd-looking other part of the novel '*Tell Me a Story*' in which Rani stays at Delhi, we get a glimpse of life of high society. Sadhna, her employer, a stalled novelist, often has meetings with popular figures from literary world. Rani is startled to see their lifestyle and the huge expenses these people can spend on unnecessaries.

"Rani happened to glance at the bill that still lay in the kitchen for the 'risotto,' 550! Rani stared at the bill unbelievably. What idiots these women were! And how undeserving! These were the kind of amounts that her father, with his clean kurta, his Dainik Bhaskar and gentle voice had been questioned about, harassed about. And here these women had leftovers on their plates along with crumpled tissues, ready to be emptied into the dustbin. It was barbaric." (Tell 151)

Sadhna's friend Sasha spent ` 18,550 on a party and considered the amount quite reasonable. It was the exact amount that Rani's family had spent when their house had been flooded. Rani reflects, "Had Papaji had that amount he would have escaped untold suffering." (165) Rani developed intense hatred in her heart for Sadhna, Sasha and all the guests who had no idea what havoc such amount can cause in the life of common people. Although Rani and Sadhna, belong to different worlds they share a subtle bond as both try to comprehend the chaotic world around them. Sadhna feels suffocated in the sophisticated, competitive and artificial world where she seems to lose her creativity.

At Delhi, Rani is alone, friendless and homesick, suddenly waking up at nights breathlessly. Most of the time her turbulent mind was lost in thoughts when memories of Amritsar came back to her. Now she was not moved to see Sharukh's album. She felt that he didn't even know the problems she was facing in her life and felt indifferent to him. Human behaviour influenced by socio-economic forces takes a cruel shape in the end of the novel when

Rani is informed at Delhi that Mahesh had committed suicide. Rani rushes to Amritsar but Neelam does not let her come inside or meet Bittu. On her way back to Delhi Rani reflects,

"It was amazing how a few rupees more or few rupees less and the temperaments of individuals could, in a year, turn a fairly happy family into a nightmarish ruin . . . .Life was over, as far as she knew. She was no longer the Rani she had once been - she no longer knew her, liked her, disliked her or cared for her. Yes, life was over."(203)

In the end we see stony-faced Rani bearing all anguish and pain within her, working at a beauty parlour in Delhi. Rupa has explored in this novel the social and financial pressures which direct a man's actions in the society. Social behaviour and relations are built upon economic foundations. We also observe that money cannot guarantee happiness and contentment as we see in Sadhna's life, but its want can certainly make human relations wither in no time. In constant struggle of working class to secure financial security and abide by the standards of the society, the fragile threads binding their relations tend to break away. The novelist has presented the chaotic world through different perceptions laying bare the struggling lives of people in an illusory and incomprehensible world. In her depiction of contemporary scenario it is indeed ironical to see that there is no respite or a ray of hope for those who work terribly hard. Life for most people remain a challenge for survival.

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