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Class, Gender and Identity: Politics of an Economic Superstructure

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Abstract:

There have been many discussions on Western feministic theories and their chronological progress through different time epochs. It has largely meant a model for the women of the world. Given individual conditions, particular ethnic groups and national cultures, women from the other countries are urging their fellow women to not fall a prey to the western theory and instead devise one that answers their peculiar situation and is able enough to bring reform in the patriarchal structure and their respective societies. This paper has tried to analyze the anomalies in the culture with regard to economic stratification of women and its resultant effect on indigenous feministic theory. Concentrating on North Indian writers writing in three different languages, the study takes up different authors focusing on the lives of elite, middleclass or poor women. Comparing these narratives, it has been projected that women of different strata meet different treatments in their families and societies and no unanimous hypothesis or theory can be framed to include their lives. Given fourth world countries like condition in some parts of India with rapid commercialization and globalization, its uniqueness for housing secluded ethnic groups as tribals, Indian women don't have access to social security like their western counterparts and need to be studied separately in culture specific contexts.

Keywords: Gender, reproductive rights, household chores, affluent countries, diasporic, middle class and working women.

Cultural conflicts and corresponding theory always emerge out of the warp and woof of complex processes that constitute a society which has always been a dystopia in terms of unequal distribution of wealth; dominance and hegemony vested with racial, linguistic, cultural or political superiority; marginal and downtrodden sections sanctified by religious preachers, historians and policy framers within patriarchy, monarchy and cultural elitedom, to inhabit the dungeons or the secluded corners of the land and above all the biological and morphic differences that form gender. The evangelicals and missionaries talk of a dreamland with no discrimination on the basis of caste, colour or creed yet that fairyland exists only in fantasy.

Virginia Woolf and her contemporaries, the so-called 'daughters of educated men' strove hard against patriarchy to bring woman out of the boundaries of domesticity and age-old inhibitions making her stay within the protected four walls of the house, suppressing her from giving a free vent to her imaginative faculties, desires and emotions, denying her all rights of ownership and restricting her to household chores by building a taboo against entering professions. The indoors

into sources of earning livelihood guaranteed economic freedom to a woman which was to be prohibited at all costs as it was against domestic bliss a woman could extend first to her husband and then to her children.

The development in Europe and its impact on colonial India and afterwards is an issue of key concern. Given the postcolonial status of a free, progressive and developing nation, the stratification among different sections of society has undergone major changes. The present paper is a modest attempt to rationally analyze this stratification in modern India and the role it plays in any delineation of Indian Feministic theory.

The present article selected some Hindi, Punjabi and English short story contemporary women writers that are from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and create characters separated spatially, economically, culturally and geographically. The divisions of urban/rural, low and middle income groups, literate and illiterate, financially stable and poor, staying in technologically advanced or backward zones and above all reaping benefits or being ignorant of laws related to domestic violence or citizenship or reproductive rights irrespective of gender have been laid bare in these works.

The authors selected for this study include diverse personalities like Manu Bhandari and Mridula Garg (who have chosen Hindi as the language of their creative expression); Jasmit Kaur and Rani Naginder Kaur (writing in Punjabi) and Shashi Deshpande (Indian English writer). The study raises crucial questions like – Can Indian women, their life style, gender roles and rights be studied from a European or American context? Does a feminist suffrage movement meet the needs of different strata of the society? How does the corporate sector supplement and challenge the economic needs of poor women? Certainly there can be no universal framework in the name of western feministic theory to compare, analyze and predict the outcome of cross-cultural literature. The hidden nuances and silences of different texts expose further shades of the lives of Indian women.

Beginning with the feminist literary theory, the earliest writers created counter cultural spaces for women, often boldly overturning traditional notions of womanhood as Ammu Joseph puts it. Mary Woolstonecraft and her followers plucked woman out of the social fabric to bring to the forefront her uniqueness as a gender, as a citizen, as a human being that should be granted civil rights. Virginia Woolf while stressing on the need of ‘A Room of one’s Own’ demanded and approved of independence but sought harmony in the family by the way of perfect understanding between opposite natures of the two sexes. She inherited this belief from her father Leslie Stephen who states that women are suited for ‘those activities that knit families together, which help to enlarge the highest ideal of domestic life’ (Feminism and Art, 12). Virginia Woolf agreed to this but revolted against the ‘overdose of domesticity’. She reiterates in ‘Night and Day’ that ‘there are no yard measures for qualities of a good mother or devotion of a daughter’ (Feminism and Art, 33).

The platform she laid down through her writings and critical essays has shown path of emancipation to most educated women but especially those who inhabit liberal and technologically advanced urban locales of the West and a select cities from the East. As for geographically remote villages, working class urban factory workers, backward, poor and marginalized castes and classes, these ideals are hollow words of some unimaginable reality which can be hardly dreamt of in a miserable quotidian existence. The feministic issues are a mockery for the third world and the fourth world countries with least developed economies and can hold good only for the first world countries. With poverty, disease, starvation, political instability and lack of education rampant, the women of the fourth world can't imagine emancipation. In their ordeals for survival, their primary concern is reproduction and doing the household chores and in both these she's been subjugated beyond description.

In the introduction to her book, *Meera Nachi - -Stri Man Ki Kahaniyan* (Meera Danced-Stories of the female mind), Mridula Garg comments upon the fierce feminism of 20th century Europe that considered motherhood a fetter for the feet and laid down the condition of abortion for women's emancipation in the economically radiant West and juxtaposes it with the paradoxical condition of a poor Indian woman who has neither the economic right of taking an independent decision nor the culture for such termination of motherhood (12). In her attempt to distinguish, she points out that working class women work hard in fields, in small scale industries, in construction work, for water and fuel and do household chores to save their families from destruction whereas most educated women fearlessly work with men in male dominated professions but are afraid of independent thinking, of renouncing traditional values and thereby getting isolated from the society (21). She considers a working class woman as true feminist who knows her worth or monetary value. Another prominent Indian feminist critic and writer Mahadevi Varma expounds in her book *Shrinkhla ki Kadiyan* (Series of a chain) that out of the three categories of Indian women, the elite are kept as items of luxurious display by men and are not much concerned with duties of household or motherhood, the poor and the laboring are not educated enough to think of those obstacles that keep them aloof from their male counterparts as they are always sharing their workload at home or outside it but the middle class women find it most hard to demarcate the boundaries of home and outside. The space that the women inhabit has costly carpets, luxurious paintings, smoky kitchens, drawing rooms with chandeliers, stinky brothels, mud houses or dusty roads and bare houses. How the dress material, upholstery and kitchen articles affect the lives of women of different social strata is another issue of concern that need to be explored with other aspects of feminine space. Jasbir Jain delineates how Indian women writers of 19th century considered jewellery, children and other material things chains for a woman in prison. But again it's a reality that most working class women are molested and outraged for the lure of pearl chains, earrings, sarees, bangles or a bottle of modest nail paint. A diamond necklace can make any Mathilde lose her youth and charm.

The issue of lure is further extendable in the context of marriage where economic disparity plays a major role. Given the practice of dowry, Lachhma (By Mahadevi Varma) finds it hard to find a

good home, a middle class girl commits suicide on hearing of her parents' decision to sell their house in an account rendered by Ambai in her story Squirrel, Rajjo is ill-treated in Maitreyi Pushpa's story and love appears empty word in Amrita Pritam's stories.

It is quite clear that economic stratification is to be incorporated for any analysis of feministic theory. The four prominent factors that come out are a) a woman's contribution to family income b) her duties as a home manager, wife, mother, daughter or a daughter-in-law c) the rights available to different sections under the law and d) her worth or respect in family matters.

Capitalism has dug gulfs between human sections and the poor in their quest to earn daily bread in economically weak countries like India, struggle with the harsh realities of life. These third world countries 'suffer from high infant mortality, low economic development, high levels of poverty, low utilization of natural resources and heavy dependence on industrialized nations' (nationsonline). With a GNI per capita 1,120.6,490 PPP dollars (2016), India (data.worldbank.org) may have slightly surpassed the criterion for inclusion as a fourth world country, with GNI less than 1035 and not more than 1242 US dollars (Wikipedia), with least developed economy, the situation is grim. Women are so absorbed that there is hardly any time for emancipatory theory as the true freedom and self-respect lie in earning and hoarding grain and milk for the children.

The story *Weh Main Hi Thi*, That was me (Garg, 140) represents the universal plight of women who die during child birth for the lack of proper medical care. The wife of the mill worker breathes uneasily because of the cement that blows with air. There was no gynecologist to assist. Uma's predecessor died. 'She had a bad luck. The child's head remained stuck in the mother's bag. Could not come out. Later on, her acquaintances in a big city said, had they tried to pull the baby out with a forceps, both would have survived' (Garg, 142). The temporal and spatial distance does not allow others to swallow this reality. Leave Europe or America; even in Indian metropolis like Delhi or Jaipur, such incidents of death are mocked at. Uma shows her ignorance for not knowing the resources for childbirth that most of Indian towns 'have one first aid centre, a compounder, a woman assistant, aspirin tablet and boiled water' (146). She also dies of hemorrhage like many other women in the vicinity in the end leaving another woman—the new born girl child. The whole story talks about silence of the place with no one to look after a woman in our industrial society where capitalists or the owners fail to analyze the death rate of women and newborns due to the dearth of facilities.

In another story by the same author *Teen Kilo Ki chhori* (the girl weighing three kilos), the trained midwife was the only facility available for maternity. She said, "the child should get mother's milk timely for three months, nothing else is required' (Garg, 24). This can turn into a legal right in advanced countries like America where senators get time to breast feed their babies; with urban educated women professionals, maternity leave can be a right but the lower economic strata can't dream of it. 'Even if she belongs to a prosperous family, she can't stay at home in the season of harvesting and cultivation' (26). The capitalist forces symbolized by Patels

in Gujarat have left no fodder or fuel for the villagers by bringing the uncultivated forest land into cultivation of tobacco. Added to it, is the co-operative dairies like Amul which snatch every drop of milk from the infants as the parents or the marginal owners of one or two cattle supplement their family income by selling milk. Leaving the mothers of unwanted gender, the mothers of boys also don't get proper rest and care. Nanniben lost her 7 days' son to diarrhea as she started loading sacks of manure into a truck. 'His intestine must be swollen because he couldn't get breast milk on time' (32) though they had a buffalo as well. She cried loudly, 'This buffalo has eaten up my Lalbhai. We had a debt of 4000 on its purchase. Instalment has to be paid every month' (33).

The stories highlight the plight of working women who struggle and labour to make both ends meet. They can't keep tears welled up in their eyes because the survival depends upon further work and labour. The question arises, Is India really at the verge of being termed a fourth world country? Or does this promise of developing economy exist leaving and conveniently ignoring the growth and reproductive health of the other weaker gender? What to talk about right to abort when they are denied even the right to breed safely? Another question that arises here is whether this is true for all the strata of Indian women?

A further analysis of Shashi Deshpande's fiction takes us from the world of working class women of Garg to educated and well to do upper middle class woman of Deshpande. In the story 'Death of a child', the wife doesn't want to have a third baby. Her husband asks, 'Are you sure?' . . . 'You women have a phobia about pregnancy' (Collected Stories, 60). She decides against his will and goes for abortion. 'Abortion is easy. The law is on your side. You have the right to decide' (68). She knew her husband wanted another male child but was aware that she had her own existence. She understands how a woman is lost in fulfilling the needs of the children. 'Children stifle your personality. You become just a mother- nothing more' (62). The end of the story exposes the tenderness of women in matters of cruel decision as the protagonist feels like a person with an amputated limb. She feels 'that the ghost of my dead child walks with me' (69). Deshpande focuses on women caught in the crisis of transitional society where the shift is taking from conventional to unconventional. Her woman is a forerunner of the doomed female of modern era as an appendage to man and family (Feminism and Shashi Deshpande's feminism).

In a sharp contrast to Indian reality is the shocking conscience Indians develop in diasporic lands. Medical technology and prosperity coupled with Indian subconscious mind leads to strange narrative such as *Panghura* (The Cradle) by Rani Naginder Kaur. Jatinder and Sonal who live in USA, hire a woman from the National Association of Surrogate Mothers. After selecting a suitable candidate, they fulfill all the formalities viz. proper medical care for the woman, insurance and risk money in case of any mishap. The study seeks askance at the statement that 'technology is far ahead of morality and law' (65). The rich hire the womb of a lady, grant the status of surrogate to a biological mother and leave her after getting the cries of a baby in their cradle. Cathy, the surrogate mother refuses to part with the child. Such affluent countries provide every kind of assistance to mother and child and nothing is considered taboo there. The Indian

mother Mrs. Bedi, to cover up her daughter's infertility, agrees to be the surrogate mother on an island. Dr Dhanwant Kaur analyses these Punjabi ethics in a postmodern world and the delineation of new rules and restrictions in a life with complete ethical freedom in her chapter 'Diasporic Punjabi Story'. She points out how the sexism and manism of the West is crushing womanhood and how she is getting more punished and exploited despite her new rights.

The three narratives project how motherhood is treated differently by the poor, the urban middle and the elite foreign settled sections of Indian society that demand a close examination of economic forces at work and the stratification of women and their further marginalization in the wake of their most basic reproductive rights. Indian women according to Mahadevi Varma enjoy 'respectless motherhood and zero-rights womanhood' (22). She is deeply concerned about economic stratification and its direct impact on women's lives and behavior and indirect one on any feministic theory. She believes that elite women keep servants for better organization of their homes and rearing up of children while they are busy with individual entertainment and perpetuation of traditions. Middle class women curb their desires and ambitions and live a brutal life and with indifference and disrespect wait for their last hours whereas working class women derive poverty from husbands and fathers.

Before the vindication of the rights of women in India, the condition of an average Indian woman was quite derogatory. The exploitation at the hands of husband and in-laws didn't necessarily correspond to the economic condition of the family. With the weight of rituals, traditions, caste, family values and honour, the widows led the worst kind of impoverished lives before the reformers sought justice for them. Since this paper is confined to the concerns of modern women portrayed in the works of contemporary authors, the next issue is the hold of a woman in a family.

Most women embrace domesticity cheerfully as Susan in Virginia Woolf's 'The Waves'. 'I shall lie like a field bearing crops in rotation. . . My children will carry me on, their teething, their crying, their going to school and coming back will be like the waves of the sea under me' (Feminism & Art, 39). The difference between the East and the West lies in the fact that whereas the western women were docile, subversive, domesticated home workers enjoying wifedom and motherhood, the new emancipated modern woman had raised the head well in 1880s as portrayed by the writings of G B Shaw. Though in Ibsen, 'the emancipated woman has taken her place at the door, always ready to depart, with her suitcase in hand' (Jain, Sangeeta 23), Shaw lends her more charm and vitality. She for him is 'energetic, preferring comfortable clothes, could smoke, fly planes, ride bicycle, had short hair' (22). Having a raised status from 'the womanly woman' to 'the superwoman', his women 'act according to their conscience and are not dependent on destiny or society' (31). These definitions in Indian context, are applicable only to a few urban, elite females. The rest still live lives full of drudgery and insecurity. One cannot ignore here strident appeals by Indian feminists like Mridula Garg and Mahadevi Varma who constantly advise Indian woman not to blindly follow the western counterparts though they are aware of their suppression for ages and are in favour of granting them civil and human rights but

with a consideration for cultural and domestic values that ensure safety of the delicate fabric called family. The Writers like Namita Gokhale, Shashi Deshpande, Mahashweta Devi question the stereotypical models of subversiveness and slavery to patriarchy personified in characters of Sita, Kunti or Draupadi but how these mythical women are an economic class onto themselves is a separate issue which will not be dealt with in this paper.

In Manu Bhandhari's short story '*Deewar, Bachche aur Barsaat*' (wall, children and rain), an educated woman is severely criticized after separation from her husband. Nobody blames patriarchy or the males for unnecessary bondage, nor does anyone try to look into the reasons of separation or search for an alternate solution. Women from the neighbourhood comment 'Education and liberty have turned the minds of girls' (103) and 'If you can't give the comfort of sharing bed to your husband, have you been brought for worship?' (105). Talking about the hierarchies within the women, Mamta Sagar, a renowned Kannada poet remarked that "the biggest challenge in this country is that the women from upper class, upper caste and privileged section should work for other women" (blogbeats).

The exploitation of the economically marginalized, downtrodden woman who works as a charwoman in upper middle class homes is clear in Jasbir Kaur's story '*Ardas*' (A Prayer). Her daughter is raped by the son of her mistress whose house she works in. The parents offer her rupees 10,000/- to keep her mouth shut. 'It's the matter of a girl, you'll earn nothing but dishonour' (36). When the mother refuses money she is threatened that the police is not going to register FIR for likes of her. Ultimately she is advised to take the girl back in an auto that suddenly meets an accident. Honour is a strange word for middle class morality for which they contrive murder of two other women whose honour they find is meant to be outraged for fun by their men and sons. The urban women, thus, manage their lives and those of their children whenever the need arises. And those shifted to western countries have the law by their side for management of their daily lives. In Rani Naginder's '*Bhainaan*' (The sisters), the elder sister sheds no tears over the death of the husband who owned a vast estate and was a patron of many societies as he never loved her. The younger one started consuming brown sugar when her officer husband was not available even during the operation of her kidney. This again raises questions like can feminine tenderness and a sense of emotional attachment and belongingness with the husband or the family be negated for the sake of western emancipation? Can a married relation devoid of love, care and mutual understanding be made to strangle life out of a woman or to throw her to the world of narcotics? If the social and economic security of affluent societies keeps them living, what will be the fate of dependent lower class women? Subhadra Kumari Chauhan and Mahadevi Varma draw sketches of those women who are sacrificed for the male desire and die for being over exploited to satisfy male lust and keeping their houses and children. Though the minor brides and child widows presented in these stories were largely a part of pre-independence India, yet there are modern instances as well. This scapegoat treatment of women is beyond the scope of this paper. The society doesn't allow freedom even to urban educated self-reliant females. A lamenting Lakshmi Kannan is quoted that 'hundreds of qualified

women' are 'in continuity in a brutal culture of erasure' (140) where domesticity suppresses them and they pay heavy prices for stepping out of their homes. Ambai, another Telugu writer, raises a pertinent question regarding this erasure if books of a female writer, instruments of a woman artiste and diary of an old aunt are preserved by the family members like those of male relatives?(indianexpress.com). She advises that women should know their history to make policies for their governance.

Nothing has been said so far regarding female desire in an Indian scenario and its representation for all the economic strata in Indian context. Saadat Hasan Manto talks about her exploitation at the hands of Indian filmmakers, butchers during partition and emotional trauma that followed it but the feminine desire is portrayed more forcefully by writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai and Deshpande. Ismat Chughtai is a path breaker in this regard but this issue will be further explored elsewhere. Suffice it will be to say here that economic stratification plays a prominent role in deciding the social, cultural, or economic status of a woman. Women in Desai's fiction are not ordinary Bengali women with "their indoor minds' starless, darkles talk about their dowries, saris and jewellery, babies and blocked fallopian tubes" but are intellectuals with Kafka, Dostoevsky in their wardrobes (Krishnaswamy, 254). The emancipation of a woman and her intellectual growth has occurred only in affluent homes and therein lays the fallacy of elite women in branding the talk on kitchen, wardrobe and marital relationship as lower or vulgar or of common working folk. Urvashi Butalia admits that in the new economic structure "women have many more possibilities than they used to have" (nakedpunch.com). The bonding between women irrespective of social or economic order only cans transform their lives.

The major issue explored here is motherhood and the rights it offers. Where on the one hand it makes no difference in the life of a woman, work has to continue uninterrupted for daily bread, the new born can wait for milk or can live on whatever the older women offer, on the other hand, it engages middle class women legislators and policy makers to decide a minimum duration for maternity and the need for special rights to breast feeding mums. The same society with its rapidly growing corporate culture that is performance oriented compels its women executives to overcome post-maternity obstacles and fears to stay at the top in the performance appraisals. Only a fragment of women can make it like Priscilla Chan, Zuckerberg's consort.

One significant aspect brought out in this analysis is that there is lack of some seminal text like Simone de Beauvoir's, Julia Kristeva's or Virginia Woolf's that can find a parallel in Indian Feministic theory. Whatever is available can be gathered from individual biographies or critical essays or the writings of Indian writers in different regional languages including English. Moreover in this postmodern world, we have multiple feminisms that lead to diversification of problems faced by women, their issues and the discourse related to create their emancipation as respectable members of the society gets a little bit obliterated due to their marginalization on other basis of religion, caste or ethnicity. Therefore an attempt is required to seriously formulate some key conceptions for a feministic theory that can be acceptable to a majority of women if

not all and that need not be the dominant culture. The popular culture through internet can offer a suitable media for this.

The pressure of domestic chores and woman's place in home have further been explored through writings available in three languages of North India and the classification of women writers as per the strata they are writing for proves that any interpretation of literary theory will have to take these factors into consideration. Many other significant facets of Modern Indian reality have been ignored no doubt which commands further insight and a holistic approach encompassing the whole of India along its geographical domains and cultural diversity.

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