



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



Feminist analysis of Rupa Bajwa's: The sari shop

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Abstract

An analysis of the 'The Sari Shop' by Rupa Bajwa using Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Theory of women and economics has been attempted. The Researcher has analyzed the different ways and circumstances through which the women protagonists were made to leave productive modes of employment to take up reproductive employment and the benefits offered to them, the consequences and the intermingling of both capitalism and patriarchy to keep those women under subjugation along with the consequences of the rebellion lead by the protagonists which differed according to their class, family and educational background.

Keywords: Charlotte Perkins Gilman; Socialist Feminism; The Sari Shop; Women and class; Women

1. Introduction

The article aims to perform an analysis and trace the conditions of subjugation, difficulties and the rebellion lead by ordinary women in their daily lives which includes the educated middle class and the subaltern woman featuring as protagonist in Rupa Bajwa's: The sari shop. The main aim of the research is to understand the conditions which are faced as obstacles by the protagonists and their reactions to it. The growth of individual self awareness and self respect causes a rebellion in their private and public lives. The paper aims to trace the consequences of this rebellion in the individual protagonists' lives which differs according to their educational background, early life, family stability, certain privileges and emotional state of the protagonists being heeded to.

2. Methodology

Gilman had argued that male aggressiveness and maternal roles for women were artificial and no longer necessary for survival in post-prehistoric times. She wrote, "There is no female mind. The brain of sex. Might as well speak of a female liver." [Wikipedia.org] [Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sage publications] Her main argument was that sex and domestic economies went hand in hand; for a woman to survive, she was reliant on her sexual assets to please her husband. [Wikipedia]

If we translate the whole thing in the Indian context then we see that the role of women in their ability to produce children is considered very important. They are solely seen as reproductive machines who are assigned to complete certain other reproductive tasks. Using the two books The Sari Shop and Mahashweta which cover a wide economic, cultural and social spectrum of a diverse group of women and yet have a focus on two main female protagonists respectively, I shall be analyzing the various problems which women belonging to those specified conditions face, their family background supporting them, emotional stability, financial conditions, society discriminating against them in various ways and few anchors of support found by them. I shall be using the theories of the above mentioned theorists to understand, analyze and highlight all these things.

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2.1. About the novel

The Sari Shop-The novel's male protagonist is a 27 year old person named Ramchand working as an attendant in a sari shop. He has a dull life which is in complete contrast to the bright, colorful saris in the shop. He had started working from the age of 15 and now he is in his 20's, all his years have passed within the walls of the shop with no exposure to the outside world. He gets a Sunday off. Once Ramchand is filled with inspiration thinking about the educated customers in his shop, he wishes to feel as worthy and knowledgeable as them. Ramchand's father wanted him to study in an English medium school, work hard and become an educated person. The same dreams have been rekindled in Ramchand after many years. Ramchand with a lifebuoy soap, one book of oxford dictionary, another book of essays and a new pair of socks was armed with a fresh inspiration to begin his life. If Ramchand's gender could be changed, you would get another person with a totally new set of problems facing her own struggles. Kamala is the subaltern woman whose plot is used by the book to not only focus on her predicament but to show the odd position in which sensitive people are left in a patriarchal setting where they can not only not help but they have to continue acting normal as if nothing has changed. Sari shop is the best example of a book which contains journalistic fiction mixed with a sensitive portrayal of the social realities of everyday life.

2.2. Influence of Patriarchy in Oppressing Kamala

This was in contrast to Kamala whose name was known to us only after significant chapters identifying her solely as Chander's wife had passed. Both Chander and Kamala's surname was not known implying to us that their surname was insignificant it neither gives them any prestige or raised their status in society. In contrast to the Victorian versions of housewives above Kamala had an existence of her own. In contrast to Ramchand who was encouraged by his parents to study and become an educated man, we find that Kamala was used as an extra and an important hand in earning money for the household. Ever since her sister-in-law entered the household, Kamala lost her right to even decide the menu for the meals. At a tender age of 10 Kamala had to start earning in order to support her family. Initially though she was seen gaining a lot of respect and reputation for her skills as a household maid and earning money which she and her family felt was a lot, her job was not emphasized on her for her personal independence and security. But instead for her family's security.

Kamala was the finest example of a woman needing to leave the productive mode of environment in order to take up the reproductive work after her marriage. Socialist feminists highlight how motherhood and the gendered division of labor grows "naturally" from women's role as mothers is the source of women's exclusion from the public sphere and creates women's economic dependence on men [Wikipedia.org]

In order to make peace with the reproductive mode of environment, Kamala was shown contemplating of coming out of her shy nature through her internal monologue.

When she sat on her doorstep sometimes and looked out at the busy people, the chattering groups of women with full lives, she wondered if she could try and make friends with some of them. Maybe they'd talk to her, even though she was an outsider. Maybe she would be able to become a part of the community. And after all, who would her child play with if she didn't try? She should start right now. [pg 154, Bajwa Rupa, The Sari Shop]

However we soon understand that when Chander lost his job from the factory, he was being exploited by the capitalist system whereas Kamala featured as the subaltern who was being exploited by the three, Chander who represented the patriarchy, the capitalist environment and poverty. Kamala was still seen coping with the new conditions well making every effort to save as much money as she could from cutting corners in every household expense.

2.3. Trauma due to triple exploitation

Even before marriage Kamala was shown making the best out of her limited resources. When Kamala had been frozen at a young age watching her mother die in front of her in a gory manner, there was no one to sort her grief out for her. It was shown that the shell shocked child had to start helping her aunt all day, cutting vegetables and folding clothes while her eyes and heart ached every moment. [pg 143, The Sari Shop]

Finally her aunt had told her "Now, after your mother, you 'ill have to look after the house. You'll have to take care of your father and brother, okay? Behave like a big girl now."

Kamala had nodded and had started going in place of her mother to the various places of work. [pg 143, Saree shop], Here too we saw that a child because of her gender was expected to cope with the grief and responsibility for the sake of the male members of the family, their wellness was prioritized more than the little girl's grief and mental health

The hazardous conditions in which she operated as a laborer of the reproductive environment was clear from the state in which she had to deal with her emotional, mental and physical trauma during her miscarriage.

Kamala already had the childhood trauma of seeing her mother die in front of her in blood which was unsorted, the fatigue and exhaustion which the miscarriage had on her was huge too but Kamala dealt with it in her own possible way and through what she knew was best at that moment by admitting herself to the hospital while she was bleeding profusely. She had come back home dazed and not having anyone to share her grief with, falling asleep due to exhaustion & despair. But Chander labeled and shamed her for dealing with her sadness in the way she knew the best. While Kamala was trying to tell a drunken Chander about her miscarriage he interjected her with his own story of how he had lost his job and they would be on the streets soon. He ended it with saying "You have been very unlucky for me, Kamala. Ever since I married you, I have been having nothing but bad luck." [pg 156, Bajwa Rupa, The Sari Shop]

He further went on to call Kamala a black tongued witch accusing her of killing her child, parents and being responsible for everyone's ill fortune,

This was too much for Kamala to tolerate and the next day when he spoke against her with venomous words, she took to drinking in order to relieve her grief which had otherwise flooded her without any outlet anywhere.

From the agency and independence shown by Kamala during her miscarriage we could make out she was an independent woman who would not easily succumb to being a victim but the whole shaming and labeling of her efforts which followed, combined by the lack of supportive environment for her even from her family's end along with the pre-conditioned belief which she was taught that men anyway hit their wives and her previous unresolved traumas you found her moving towards hopelessness, acting humanely rebellious and wanting to end her pain. The same Kamala who was doing the best she could in all the situations in life who even before her marriage made the best out of her limited resource and was seen dealing with trauma by staying busy in her own world was now seen disintegrating completely as all her hopes had got vanquished with the miscarriage, as pregnancy and child rearing were the sole objectives of her reproductive labour. From here we saw Kamala pick up drinking as an antidote to tolerate all of Chander's beatings.

2.4. Society's gender biased reaction to Kamala's entire condition

Drinking is one of the biggest taboos in the Indian society. Kamala who had picked up drinking due to her husband's severe domestic violence, was solely blamed and not a word of rebuke was allotted to Chander who was the chief cause of all her destruction. In women and economics Charlotte Perkins Gilman described women's economic dependence on men as one of the chief causes for their subjugation, Kamala not being able to work was a contributing partial factor in her condition but the other half was also the devilish behavior of her husband having a destructive effect on her already traumatized psyche which would further render her incapable of being able to work. Kamala being disturbed after her miscarriage and dealing with her pain in that manner was taken unsympathetically by people who thought that as a woman she needed to pull herself up and take care of her husband, thus a woman not being able to match up to her reproductive duties was taken in a bad manner. Gokul's words to Hari and Ramchand on Kamala's condition while blaming her for Chandan's predicament were "Things like miscarriage and all keep happening to women, if all of them continue reacting like that, what sort of a society would we be left with?" [pg 120]. This shows women acting humane enough to grieve the loss of their progeny after the reproductive duties and dreams being forced on them as their only salvage shatter, then they are not even given the time, space and empathy to mourn properly. Gokul further stated that "A woman should know her place. Maybe she has difficulties, maybe she has had problems, but it is a woman's duty after all to take care of her husband and his home first, and later think about herself". In simple words Gokul stated that it was Kamala's duty to care about Chander's ill temper and insecurities first and then care about her own trauma and physical pain later on. When some women use their own methods to pull themselves together after trying everything available then their absence from the reproductive space is taken very badly to justify all the ill-treatment happening to them.

We find there is no one who would take responsibility for Chander's ill and irresponsible behavior towards Kamala. Kamala's father had already passed away and not much was mentioned about Chander's parents. Chander was an exploitative institution all by himself. There was an obvious trauma that was arising due to poverty too which we had previously seen Kamala was coping with well and was trying to do the best in her situation for it.

Kamala thought that people got married almost everyday but red beads were far more difficult to find. Kamala had accepted Chander's ill treatment of her due to the society having conditioned her to believe that it was a common part of married life. Thus Kamala was not just a victim of capitalist system but also of the patriarchy.

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Authors short biography



Rupa Bajwa an Indian writer is a recipient of the GrinZane prize, the Commonwealth award and the Sahitya Academy Award. *The Sari shop* brings out the contrast between the several layers of the society. The reader feels that he has gone on a journey with the characters though an empty journey. Apart from *Sari shop* Bajwa's second novel tells a story that created controversy though it received critical appreciation from many quarters.