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The idea of false sisterhood: The post- feminist echoes in Rupa Bajwa's the sari shop

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Abstract

The paper makes an attempt to reveal that Indian feminist movement has not permeated all segments of women in society. The paper reveals how the two worlds of glaring inequalities do exist in Indian society where the women of upper-class society take the lower class women as "resident aliens" (*Feminism without Borders*: 129). However, the paper investigates the fact that even in elite strata of society, corridors of power are only controlled by males and elite women are only domestic maids. The major focus of the paper throws light on the world of the elite women the majority of which take pleasure only in shopping and gossiping and evade serious issues and fail to redistribute the comforts and pains of their less privileged sisters. The paper also vindicates Rupa Bajwa's stand as a post-feminist, through the character of Ramchand, where she blames elite class of women for not considerate enough about underprivileged women who own very few resources. She does not choose a subaltern heroine, rather chooses subaltern hero to vindicate her point that women are not only the victims of male oppression but from their own sisters as well. The writer seems to lambast the feminist tendency that patriarchy is not the only channel of oppression.

Keywords: Post feminism, underprivileged women, false sisterhood

The writer, through this novel seems to shatter the idea of false sisterhood in Indian feminist discourse. The writer in post-feminist stance lays bare the idea that it is not only men who are perpetrators of violence against women, but the women, who are generally maltreated as the "other" becomes the "oppressor" for the members of their own sex. The third wave of feminism that is also called post-feminism attacks essential identities in which women remain fixed to one position. The age of essentialism has become the thing of past and little narratives have become more important than meta-narratives. In other words it is safe to say that local narratives have sounded the death knell of meta-narratives. In a similar fashion Chandra Talpade Mohanty, a cross-cultural feminist states that "Feminism without borders is not the same as "border-less" feminism. It acknowledges the fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears, and containment that borders represent". (*Feminism without Borders*: 2)

The paper also aims to show that even the upper class women lead a marginal existence albeit in different ways. Mrs Sandhu who comes from bourgeois society has been domesticated in a non-traditional way. She is happy with the fact that she is the queen of electronic kitchen. This urbanised kitchen carries with it urbanised form of violence where the job done in the most domesticated place is taken as the first and primary duty of a lady. The tribe of these ladies remains trapped in their standardised domesticity. They are equipped with latest gadgets to buy their quiescence. Mrs Sandhu seems to think that she has gone beyond feminism because she has all the comforts of life. She had a beautiful house, status family, a caring husband and good looks... (*The Sari Shop*: 13). So here Indian feminism ends for Mrs Sandhu. She is also the victim of patriarchal aestheticism, the technology designed by men to domesticate women. This new form of urbanised kitchen serves as a link between her sense of pride and in a way patriarchal submission. Seshadhari, the literary critic, remarks "despite the relative expansion of space and voice, the emerging image of women is still that of a suffering woman (quoted in *The Danger of Gender*: 49). Clara Nubile shares the same line of thought "It can be added that in contemporary women's writing the suffering is modern, urban and globalised, and that in real life, just like in fiction, women do still suffer in India" (ibid). These elite class ladies are just the pale shadows of their high status husbands because it is men who own the means of production. Zillah

Eisenstein coined the term “capitalist patriarchy” in which men have the control over the means of production (*Feminism without Borders*: 4). Their creativity and power only remain confined to their homes and in the streets of big markets where they can buy costly things of their own choice at the expenses of their respective husbands. Slavoz Zizek has talked of Kant’s formula in his book *First as Tragedy Then as Farce* “Think freely, but obey” (105). Similar is the condition of the upper class ladies mentioned in this novel who lead a life of cloistered domesticity without posing any threat to male bastion. In a consumer market, lady customers are treated altogether differently than the male customers. The shops that sell ladies’ items are markedly different than the men’s as far as their aesthetic appeal is concerned. This culture of lustre and glamour makes them more domesticated because their demands are only fulfilled at sari shops and beauty saloons and the idea of craving for higher values of life is replaced by the items of aesthetic value. This market of aesthetic pleasures is owned by men to beautify women in order to stop them from entering male-dominated terrains and stop them from being masculine. How can a woman with a sari, fight in an arena with the spirit of a wrestler because she has already been made a feminine entity who can only tighten the pleats of her sari to do her domestic chores. The novel clearly states the fact that women have a sense of togetherness with women of their own class only and they show indifference and disregard to their proletariat sisters in their times of crisis. In this novel under critical discussion, the first floor at The Sewak Sari Shop is the first choice of mostly rich ladies who visited this shop because here they could buy the things of their own choice. This first floor catered to the aesthetic sense of both the buyers and the sellers. In this old fashioned shop, some new fashioned saris were sold to most of the upper class customers. The rolling and unrolling of silk saris was the only business that never ceased in that shop. Mrs Bhandari was haughty because of her husband’s privileged position in Police department. She has been shown as a social activist but this kind of social activism only shows her to be the pseudo benefactor of the underprivileged strata of society. Patriarchal aesthetics is in full swing when a lady wins a beauty pageant with the help of the ogling and lewd eyes of the spectators. Another woman, Mrs Gupta who comes from business family was very particular about her feminine charm like Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock*. She revolutionised her aesthetic sense with Revlon lipsticks. Her elder son Tarun’s marriage with Shilpa seems to be more like an economic alliance in which her son would form a business partnership with her brothers (16). The marriage deal between Tarun and Shilpa looks as if it were the economic summit between the ambassadors of two countries. On the other hand, poor Kamla who was married off to Chander who was employed at Sewak Sari Shop could only buy the tube of fair and Lovely after saving up for two months. Kamla represents that tribe of women who only enjoy the so-called liberty in the four walls of the house and they are further relegated to the den of misery when they have to confront with the ever increasing bickerings of her husband and the environment of lack and paucity of resources further pushes her into the never ending cycle of repressive desires that can’t even be materialised in the dreams because they spend sleepless nights with the acute depressive syndrome. The equations don’t change for the better after her marriage to Chander. The personal chemistry between Kamla and Chander remains in a turbulent state

most of the times. She is prone to sexual violence within and outside their homes. Kamla’s plight is an antithesis to other urban women like Mrs Gupta, Mrs sandhu. The transformation in Ramchand’s temperament is a kind of indictment against the divisions that have been created in an unequal society. His sense of patriarchal aestheticism that is fulfilled through Sudha, gives way to the feelings of melancholia when he remembers the blood stained blouse of Kamla, an underprivileged woman in this text. Another woman, Mrs. Sachdeva who shares her class solidarity with Mrs. Bhandari is the head of the English Department at a local college. The writer ironically remarks “She wasn’t one of the vain, idle housewives that this city was so full of. She was a literate woman, Head of an English Department.” (28). But education has not sensitised her mind so that she can delve deep into the perennial problems of other marginalised women. Another elite class woman Mrs. Bhandari is proud of the fact that she is a social activist. But her philanthropic tendency can’t bring any respite to the needy people of her area. She organises charity programmes to indicate that her efforts would uplift the weaker sections of society. She could have turned out to be the benefactor of Kamla but she was least bothered about the sub-human condition of that wretched lady. Similarly Mrs. Gupta, Mrs. Kapoor fail to identify with Kamla because she is only the wife of Chander who is an attendant at The Sewak Sari Shop. Shilpa, a budding representative of class superiority, Mrs. Gupta’s daughter-in-law fails to detect the real cause behind Kamla’s mental imbalance and retorts to her husband “How could she say such terrible things about you...you are the kindest, sweetest man in the world” (170). Similarly Tarun her husband is oblivious on the stress on Kamla’s face but he wants his unborn child to be free from stress “ Any sort of stress is bad for you and the baby” (170). The Kapoor family has been shown as super-rich who own a palatial house and a number of cars. Their daughter’s wedding brings out huge economic disparity that exists in India where the super rich showcase their economic power and the poor merely witness the drama of extravagance and gape their mouths with an element of utter surprise. They unlike other customers give orders for the Sewak Sari Shop and Ramchand the intelligent major-domo is chosen to carry the expensive stuff to Kapoor house. The sassy kapoors make fun of Ramchand’s dress and advise him to dress properly. Poor Ramchand tries to make himself gentleman by buying shirt, trousers, socks, oil, bar of Lifebuoy soap and a lemon to keep away odour from his toes. The author also seems to emphasize the fact that the class based divisions do co-exist with the caste based divisions. The lines of demarcation are clearly drawn to bifurcate the haves and have nots of society. The different class groups mentioned in the novel show women to be the enemies of one another. Mrs Kapoor, the super-rich woman of the locality, who is full of hubris and arrogance, is so obsessed with the idea of class superiority that she dislikes Mrs. Sachdeva because she is the ordinary, the professor type service class woman (91). Mrs Sachdeva forgets her own mother tongue and speaks in English to prove the point that by using Queen’s language, she might be able to conceal her lower class status in front of Mrs. Kapoor. Mrs Kapoor, the owner of out-sized ego, welcomes her wryly and then mutters to herself “That woman is speaking English on purpose, just to show her up...well, they didn’t even have their own house, they lived in an accommodation provided by the college... (92). The ladies like Mrs. Sachdeva detest

their national language Hindi. Ramchand is severely snubbed by her when he complains against Gupta family for they were responsible for Kamla's mental in equilibrium. She snubs Ramchand "I don't want to listen to all that vulgar rubbish again, that too in Hindi" (214). This obnoxious brand of hate politics exists among the women of heterogeneous class society just to belittle and humiliate their lower class sisters. The talk between Reena and Sachdeva hints at the class based divisions where the binaries of moneyed class and salaried class co-exist in which the first binary overpowers the second one. Rina remarks that the serviced class and the moneyed class are always at loggerheads with one other and curse and blame one another in derogatory language. Then Rina and Sachdeva busy themselves in the discourses of post-colonialism and paradigms of poverty evincing the false signs of solidarity with the oppressed strata of society. The objective of the galaxy of these female characters seems to fulfil their aesthetic and artistic pleasures. Mrs. Sandhu has put on an extra pound of flesh around her waist only to work in an electronic kitchen. Their talk only revolves around Revlon creams to latest trends in saris. They have completely closed themselves into the "intense atmosphere of pervading femininity" (89). The writer takes the post-feminist stance when he introduces the subaltern hero Ramchand as the harbinger of hope for the most downtrodden woman in the novel Kamla. It is only Ramchand who strikes a chord with Kamla. This form of uncommon conviviality of Ramchand with Kamla deconstructs the notion that it is only patriarchal society which blocks women's rights to equality. The post feminist approach indicates that men and women are equally victims of the oppressive social structures. Alka Saraogi, a Hindi novelist and short story writer in a post-feminist vein states "Women's emancipation is not an isolated, self-contained issue; it is related to every other oppression, be it in the name of caste, colour, religion or economic equality. So... we have to think of Homo sapiens in the next millennium and not just women..." (quoted in *Feminism and Post-feminism*: 152) The transformation in Ramchand's temperament is a kind of indictment against the divisions that have been created in an unequal society. His patriarchal aestheticism that is fulfilled through Sudha, another female character in this text, is the only means to give him physical relief from daily drudgery. A war of conscience takes its turbulent place in the mind of Ramchand because he tries to wail Kamla out of this precarious situation but Mrs Sachdeva bursts out her indignation "How dare you, a mere shop assistant, bring me here to this corner and tell me filthy stories about the kind of women you seem to know" (213). No upper class lady shares an ounce of regret at the miserable plight of Kamla. He even pleads the case of kamla before his customers like Mrs. Sachdeva. Kamla's plight is an antithesis to other urban women like Mrs. Gupta, Mrs. Sandhu and Mrs. Kapoor. But her plight does not smote their conscience at all. She is burnt alive in her home by Ravinder Kapoor's hooligans because she vehemently protests against the injustice meted out to her husband Chander. Her helplessness is the helplessness of millions of ladies who are left to fend for themselves in this unjust and so-called democratic society. Thus it is an attempt to show the cultural, social and economic disparity amongst the different class groups in Indian conditions in which women are merely the spectators to watch the power games of masculine society.

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