

Women and Class in Post-Colonial Literature

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“A world without caste, class and a world without social regimentation”

- Mulk Raj Anand

Untouchability is the direct product of the caste system. It is an age-old concept of the caste system that symbolizes the inhuman classification of people. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar wanted an undivided or unbiased society where everyone is enjoying equality in every field. A whole section of Indian society is kept in a suppressed state, ill-fed, ill-paid, and ill-treated based on their caste. They were deprived of proper income. Women of the lower class, especially, were pathetically affected because of this system. They were not given the right to education. They were confined to a life that is no less than a prison.

Class division is the fundamental contradiction that all other forms of oppression revolve around. Women's struggle and class struggle are the two sides of the same coin. The only strength of the working class is unity across gender, sexuality, etc. It is, therefore, in the interest of the whole working class including men, to fight the oppression of women.

The history of class struggle shows the continuing effects of the world's historic defeat of the female sex intertwined and subordinated to class relations of exploitation. Men comforted themselves with the thought that women need to look after the house and family. Women's oppression in most societies has been because of the family property handed down from the fathers to the sons. The woman is an indispensable part of the family, especially for children, but her role is still considered a secondary one.

Women will never be liberated till class oppression exists since so many women suffer as victims of gender discrimination as well as sexual oppression. Middle-class women do suffer from general sexism too but, their compensating class privilege, greater wealth, better access to education and healthcare, and freedom from solo responsibilities of household work or childcare force them to side with their class rather with the working-class women struggling for liberation.

The capitalists use divisions within the working class to attack the conditions of the workers. The fight against women's oppression is a struggle for the entire working class regardless of gender; the only strength of the working class is in unity. The linking of women's liberation and the class struggle is crucial if we want to fight for gender equality.

It is important to note, however, that the caste system was inherent at birth. Furthermore, while the caste system reached its fullest development only in certain regions of the world such as India, the caste system evolves far beyond it to become a world system. It is true that all forms of class society have been male-dominated and that men are trained from the cradle to be chauvinists.

As the industrial revolution steamed ahead, women were also hired for jobs in factories and for housekeeping courses, which enabled them to make money and be self-dependent without the need for a man's support. However, women still faced the harsh conditions of factory life as men such as working long hours, doing hazardous work, etc, for low wages. Also, it was not uncommon for women to be sexually harassed or assaulted while working by their male superiors.

According to the family moral system, women are expected or rather forced to serve others in their household. While wealthy women can hire servants to do the dull course for them, poor women are left to an endless grind for their whole lives. Their condition of servitude is compounded when they are obliged to take an outside job to help and sustain the family shouldering two responsibilities instead of one. They are the "double oppressed" poor women torn apart by the conflicting obligation of taking care of their children at home while at the same time working outside to help the family.

The theme of the immense self-sacrifice of a woman as a mother, coupled with the failure of reciprocity and betrayal by sons, surfaces powerfully in a modern Bengali short story titled 'Breast Giver' by Mahasweta Devi. It centers on Jashoda, a poor rural brahmin woman, a mother of twenty and nursemaid of thirty and more who spent her life pouring out her body's milk to nourish her own and her master's children. She is a complete embodiment of the goddess both by nature and physical appearance. Just as the mother Goddess bestows her limitless love over her children selflessly so did Jashoda bestow her milk of life to her masters' babies. She is endowed with the rare gift of feeding nearly fifty children which any other woman couldn't accomplish. But in the end, she is abandoned by all of her children when she becomes old and can no longer produce or nurse. Her almost fifty sons forget her and her breast, the distinguished organ of the woman. Her breast becomes the site of ugly festering cancer source. Jashoda cries "Must I finally sit by the roadside with a tin cup?" The sores on her breast keep mocking her with a hundred mouths and hundred eyes. In the end, Jashoda sadly says, "If you suckle, you are a mother of all lies!" Jashoda dies alone and without identity. She is cremated by an untouchable. Jashoda is a living replica of Sati-Savitri-Sita rightly living up to the aphorism – A female's life hangs on like a turtle's – 'her heart breaks but no word is uttered'- 'the woman will burn, her ashes will fly/only then will we sing her/praise on high'.

Jashoda was exploited not because she was a woman but because of the class structure to a certain extent. The Haldar household was using Jashoda's body. People around her realise that her new profession is a positive milestone in her life. The female body has the reproductive system to nurse and rare children and Indian women are seen mostly as mothers by profession. Ironically, a woman is a mother only till her body is of use for reproduction. As soon as her body becomes disabled, her identity as a mother is thrashed.

The bond between mother and children is stronger than all the other bonds. A mother's milk is also a special substance mixed with a mother's love and distilled from her body's blood which creates a great pool of attachment between her and her children. A mother raises the children with such tremendous efforts and pain, but the children forget the mother's sacrifice and everything she did for them. Ultimately there is a failure of reciprocity of affection and love. Mothers will always love and give their children more than they are loved and given in return. Women as wives and mothers give all of their lives never receiving as much as they have given.

Despite all the praises and alienation, she received, Jashoda is exploited because of the class structure. The woman of the Haldar household has the same gender role as Jashoda. The Haldar women gave birth to children, but do not nurse them for the fear of losing their beauty. All the women's bodies in the story are for their husbands' pleasure and the husbands of the Haldar women wanted their wives to keep their figures. Women in the story are inferior to men likewise, Jashoda has continuously been described as a faithful wife to her husband. She neither complains nor shows any contempt towards her lame husband. She refers to him as her guru and by doing so she instantly reveals that he is superior to her. The difference between Haldar women and Jashoda is that Haldar women have more privileges than Jashoda because of their higher class; these women have the choice of not raising their children therefore, they use their status and privilege to exploit Jashoda.

For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a feminist critic, Devi's reading of the story is an allegory of Nationalism as it ignores the lower-class position of women such as Jashoda. Spivak argues that 'Stanyadayini' (Breast Giver) highlights the particular social oppression of the subaltern women in the post-colonial nation. Spivak demonstrates how Jashoda's reproductive body becomes a site of economic exploitation. In Spivak's reading of Breast Giver, the story doesn't merely offer a parable of India after decolonization but also highlights the failure of nationalism to transform the lives of subaltern women.

Literature talks about Dalits' experiences, their humiliation, and the trauma which they underwent. Kumud Pawde, a Maharashtrian woman born into a family belonging to the Mahar community, has written a seminal essay titled "The Story of My Sanskrit" in Marathi. It was translated into English by Arjun Dangle. This essay describes the struggles she faced while growing up and while aspiring to become a Sanskrit scholar while the language was still confined to the higher caste Hindus. 'The story of My Sanskrit' is taken from the collection of essays, "Poison Bread" by Arjun Dangle.

Pawde displays rare courage in the pursuit of her dream of academic excellence. The discrimination that was meted out to the people of the lower class is a well-documented fact. These were the people who were not allowed to even draw water from the wells that were used by the higher-class people. They had to rely on the mercy of the upper-class people to quench their thirst. They had to bear social and economic repression and atrocities. Burdened further were the women who had to bear severe sexual exploitation. Pawde's autobiography, probably for the first time, details the struggles of the life of an untouchable woman who had the courage and confidence to enter the public sphere. The essay 'The Story of My Sanskrit' underlines how the field of education, also becomes prey to discrimination and suppression.

According to Pawde, the quest for identity is the basic problem of downtrodden people. Dalit women are paid fewer wages. Even educated Dalit women suffer. They face several hindrances in each and every phase of their life to prove their worth. They suffer because they are women and Dalits. The poor lower-class women have to work both in and out of the house and have to protect themselves from violence. Poverty is a great curse on Dalit women. They have to make a two-way struggle inside the house and outside the house as Indian society is a patriarchal society. Most of the time, they do not get an opportunity to study. Even after completing their education, they are not allowed to work and lead independent lives. They lead their lives by being submissive to their husbands. The writer Kumud Pawde was well educated but she also had to face several difficulties in getting a job as she belonged to a lower class. Her intellect, which is no less than her male colleagues couldn't aid her in getting a job. Kumud Pawde aspired to be a lecturer in Sanskrit. She pursued Bachelor and Masters in Sanskrit. She was the first woman from her caste to do so. Instead of getting a job, all that she received was flowers from the Vice-chancellor.

Caste discrimination has humiliated her since childhood. The trauma and stigma of such embarrassing situations are too deep to be healed. People not only from higher castes, but also from her own caste discouraged her from taking up Sanskrit as they believed that Sanskrit, the *Devvaani* is only for higher caste people. The thought of lower caste women stepping into the territory of upper caste was an unimaginable event. Pawde secured a job as a lecturer in Sanskrit only after marrying a man from upper caste. The irony is, she was jobless till she was "Kumud Sonkunwar". The surname 'Pawde' only helped her in getting a job of her choice.

In the course of the class struggle, men should be re-educated who have been brought up into believing that women are naturally the inferior sex or weaker of the two. Men will have to learn that in the hierarchy of oppression created by capitalism, their chauvinism and dominance is another important weapon in the hands of the master class for maintaining its rules.

Literature abounds with such instances wherein women from the lower class were forced to face all kinds of ills. In 'Untouchable' by Mulk raj Anand, the character Sohini, a girl from lower class is sexually harassed by a priest. In spite of being a victim of such a heinous crime, Sohini couldn't question the priest. All she could do was, be silent and blame fate and accept that she is helpless as she is a woman from the lower class. Even when her brother, Bhaka rushes like a storm to punish the priest, Sohini arrests his progress.

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Sohini's caste refrains her from questioning the injustice that she is met with or rather it can be said that the orthodox caste system made women, especially women from lower caste so helpless and vulnerable that their voices are muffled even when their chastity is in danger which is a clear case of double colonization.

Grace Nichols, a Guyanese poet voices her anguish about the concept of women and class in many of her works. One such poem is 'Waterpot' which portrays the life of a black woman who faces and suffers from racism, slavery, and colonization. The women of the working class were better off than their male counterparts. Women of the lower class did physical labor alongside their husbands, and even girls at a very young age started helping out with family work. The living and working conditions were very harsh by normal standards with the working class having it a little better.

The woman's life is filled with hardships. She has to work every day in order to shoulder the responsibilities of her family. Nichols compares the woman to cattle in the poem. This symbolizes how women, especially blacks are mistreated. They carry no identity of their own.

Even after toiling throughout the day, the woman tries to stand like a royal cane. She never loses her dignity even after being mocked by the overseer. The fighting spirit in her makes her strong and lets her battle life with a heart filled with courage. The waterpot, the woman carries symbolizes nourishment for her children and for the next generation. Though these women are triply colonized, they do not give up and continue to strive for their rights.

'Annihilation of Caste' by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, an undelivered speech prepared for the 1936 annual conference of the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore, elaborately explains the demons of the caste system and especially how women of lower caste were the worst victims.

Ambedkar narrates many incidents that mirror the atrocities of the higher caste people. In the village of Zanu in the Ahmedabad district of Gujarat, in November 1935, some women from the lower caste of well-to-do families started fetching water in metal pots. The higher caste people looked upon the use of metal pots by them as an affront to their dignity and assaulted the women for their actions. According to the rules of the caste system, women from lower castes must attend all cases of confinement of higher caste Hindu women. They must not wear gold or silver ornaments, though they can afford them. They must not wear fancy gowns.

'Manu-smriti' had laid down the rules and regulations related to the caste system and Manu, the writer of the book has given an inferior position to women and people from the lower caste and this made Dr. B. R. Ambedkar burn the book.

Krupabai Sathianandhan's "Kamala" portrays the similar struggle of a lower caste girl, Yeshi. She is beaten up along with her mother when her father is not served food properly. The most pathetic part of it is, she isn't aware of the injustice that is done to her because of her gender and caste.

Even today people are discriminated against because of their caste. People should consider that time is changing and nothing is eternal and change is the law of life for every individual and society. From time immemorial women, especially of lower castes faced several humiliations because of their gender and caste for which they were no way responsible. Literature preserved their struggles in the form of stories. It's time the world realized the potential women carry within. Women must come together and voice their rights to fight injustice and must not just stay muted. They have all the power within to change the way the world perceived their strength.

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