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CLASS AND GENDER IN THE WRITINGS OF RUPA BAJWA

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ABSTRACT

Rupa Bajwa in her novel *The Sari Shop* portrays the lives of the rich and poor of Amritsar intersect. The ritual of buying a sari is used to give insight into the female psyche "women rarely, almost never bought a sari alone." Bajwa manages to capture the heartbeat of a small-town with its petty rivalries between the rich wives of industrialists. It also satirises the sanctimonious superiority of the resident intellectual, Bajwa is generous with her sarcasm as she draws pithy pen-portraits of these women.

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The novel *THE SARI SHOP*, gives a strong portrayal of the vast inequalities between the rich and the poor, working class in India, Bajwa dramatically illustrates the class gap in contemporary India in her debut novel, focusing on the fortunes of Ramchand, a shop assistant in Sevak Sari House in Amritsar, spends his days patiently showing yards of fabric to the women of "status families" and to the giggling girls who dream of dressing up in silk but can only afford cotton. He is very sensitive to everything going on around him. He dislikes the life he lives currently--his one-room dark and dismal lodging, his mundane job, his aimless wandering around after work, his dhaba dinners, and the Sunday matinees with his co-workers. He wants better for himself, When Ramchand is sent to a new part of the city to show wares to a wealthy family preparing for their daughter's wedding, and he is jolted out of the rhythm of his narrow daily life. His glimpse into a different world gives him an urgent sense of possibility. He begins to see himself, his life, and his future more clearly. And so he attempts to recapture the hope that his childhood had promised. Though the protagonist of the novel is

RAMCHAND, who raises his voice against capitalism but ends within 13 days, I would like to reflect the novel in KAMAL, S view.

As varied as the sarees in Sevak Sari shop are the women in the novel. They are all in one way or the other products and victims of the consumerist world. One category of women portrayed in the novel are the educated, well respected women who lead a life of empowerment and independence and of individual choice and (sexual) pleasure. They are governed by consumer culture, fashion, hybridism, humour, and most of them show a renewed focus on their female body. One can aptly call them the post feminists. Many of them are house wives who have redefined and re signified domestic sphere as a domain of female autonomy and independence by severing its previous associations with drudgery and confinement. To them men are equal partners and never a rival or their victimisers. The all belong to the category of the urban elite. They are the liberated women whose tragic flaws are their hypocrisy and snobbery. They are the products of the consumerist world and the pivotal hinge on which consumerism survives and surges ahead. Apart from these attributes the women of this elite

class are totally indifferent to the economically underprivileged. For them the poor are the lesser mortals meant to serve them and nothing more. The other category of women is the ones who inhabit the lowest strata of the society and has not really made it and continue to live in conventional relationships where hope and violence are permanently entwined. These women though raises their voices against the patriarchy that controls their lives, it is not because of their desire to be equals but to cling on to their basic right to live and to be treated as humans . But their voices get muffled and scattered in a highly self centred world. And they remain as invisible presence in the fast paced lives of the urban elite.

Mrs Sandhu, Mrs Gupta, Mrs Bhandari are the other representatives of this highly individualistic group. In spite of they being known by their husbands surname they lead a liberated life. They are not desperate house wives who toil in their kitchen, shackled to the four walls of their houses. They are all houses proud and are the successors of the Victorian living room mistresses. They spend their days gossiping, match making and shopping. Mrs Sandhu is the wife of a chief engineer .She is someone who is intensely interested in her house. She 'had planned the construction as well as the furnishing very carefully.'(12).

Mrs Gupta, who stays two houses away, is a fitness freak. She in her late fifties looked much younger through 'her careful diet and regular exercise...On the dressing table below the room-reflection, stood a jar of L'Oreal anti-ageing cream, a bottle of lakme cleansing milk, packs of deep -red bindis and a bottle of perfume...These were the things that she used everyday' (14).

Mrs Bhandari was a beauty contest winner and she is now in her forties. She claims to be a social activist and organizes charity programmes at the Rotary club. She has also established herself as a good cook. 'She could bake the most marvellous cakes that could beat the cakes in Delhi's best bakeries'. (26)

This is the brand of women whom Germaine Greer points out in *The Whole woman* as women who are presented as 'have it all'—a career, motherhood, beauty, and a great sex life— by the

consumerist market which actually only resituates them as consumers of pills, paint, potions, cosmetic surgery, fashion, and convenience foods.

Their air of superiority is evident in their attitude toward the shop assistants. Rupa and her mother ordering Ramchand to display the sarees he has brought to their houses, Mrs Sachdeva's cold remark about the shop assistants lesser intellect to her friend Mrs Bhandari when the assistant failed to understand her choice of sarees— 'you can't really make these people understand' all exhibit their callous attitude towards the people of the lower strata of the society (26).

In *Fire with Fire* Naomi Wolf calls them the power feminist generation who are 'unapologetically, 'free-thinking', 'pleasure-loving' and 'self-assertive' (149)

Though the wives of the shop assistants the author Rupa Bajwa paints the picture of the economically weaker counterparts. These women like the women of the elite class do have aspirations but their dreams are rarely fulfilled. Though they are all known by their names they do not lead a liberated life, but are always under the shadow of their husbands. Their family lives appear monotonous in their struggle for earning their next meal. They were unlike the sarees in *Sevak Sari* shop-colourless. The author never gives us the picture of these women from an omniscient narrator's point of view, but as reported by their husbands .To Gokul , his wife Lakshmi was someone who was never satisfied by their petty means of living. According to Gokul she was a demanding wife who never remained mute to her needs. 'She comes back from her occasional visits to her house 'with her head full of rubbish'. (34).

Subash, a friend of Ramchand later reports on a lady customer who demanded the replacement of a damaged good she had bought the day before. These women are assertive as their rich counterparts but their lack of social status makes their voices mute.

" Every coin has two sides" refers to the differences or two polar opposite sides of the one thing which cannot be united but here, Bajwa gives these idea only through the depiction of Rina Kapoor and Kamala who deals with the polar

opposite situations as well as destiny. Here, Rina Kapoor can be considered as the shining part of the coin and Kamala can be the darker side. Patriarchy snatched Kamala's freedom.

Rina Kapoor, the postgraduate daughter of the leading business family tops the list of the liberated post feminist women of the novel. Apart from being educated, she has convinced her traditional family to let her marry the man of her choice. She breaks the tradition by not marrying into a business family, but to a service class. In Rina's words

She was "breaking the commercial streak that ran through her family and was trying to span the gap" (The Sari Shop 93).

She later firmly establishes herself as a novelist by writing a novel about a shop assistant in a sari shop for which Ramchand, the trembling sari-wala who lied about being invited by her for her wedding reception, provides the real inspiration. She has her views on everything whether it is her garments, her grooming or her future plans. But the irony of the situation surfaces when the narrator adds on the following comments on Rina's feat.

If she had been a plain, unmarried girl from an ordinary family, it wouldn't really have much news in Amritsar, a city that had much money but only one real bookshop. But since Rina was recently married, rich, glossy and wanted to draw the attention of the cream of Amritsar,

Kamla, wife of Chandra is another proletariat like Ramchand, can be considered as the worst sufferer in the victorious world of capitalist only because of her revolt against them. Here, in the novel, Kamla is the only female figure who is enlightened and able to understand the oppression of the capitalist; therefore behaved in such a way that deconstructs the traditional norms of female behaviour.

"Marriage happens to everyone, red beads rarely came one's way." (Part II, Page No—147)

The huge gulf between the world of the haves and the have not's become most evident through the way Kamala, the wife of Chander is being introduced.

'Her face was deeply lined, though she could not have been more than thirty, even less perhaps.'(104).

This representation reminds one of the middle aged women of the affluent classes who never looked their ages. Kamala was never aware of her rights and had to start working as a house maid at a tender age of eight.

"Girl must learn household work, and the sooner they started, the better it was....."
(Part II, Page No---141)

She never expressed her mind and was badly beaten up by her husband and raped by the police men. She resorted to drinking as a way of protest, a protest against the mistreatment of her husband and against the insensitive world which turns a blind eye at the economically under privileged. Kamala's misfortunes started with the closing down of Mr Guptas and the Kapoors factory in which Chander worked. Since the factory incurred losses the owners did not pay Chander his last three months salary. It played havoc on their family budget and thus sowed the seeds of ruin of their family life. Chander found her an ill woman and responsible for his pathetic state. Therefore tortured like hell.

"You have been very unlucky for me, Kamala. Ever since I married you, I have been having nothing but bad luck" (Part II, Page No---156)

He started to get drunk and when Kamala followed so he could not accept it and ignored her completely. The only way in which Kamala tried to make her voice heard was hauling stones at Mr. Gupta's and Kapoor's house and shouting abuses at them. But no one listened to her and she had to pay penance to her trespass by getting raped by the police and eventually getting burned by the thugs sent by Ravinder Kapoor. The chasm that separates the privileged and the less privileged in a multicultural, multilingual Indian urban society is deep. Ramchand, being as sensitive as he is, wants to help her. He knows that underneath the garb of an alcoholic lies a woman who is just a victim of circumstance (and not unlucky as her superstitious husband would believe). Unfortunately, no one is prepared to adopt a charitable view with regard to

Kamala. Most of his co-workers believe that Chandra was justified in beating her because....

"...Maybe she has had 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..."

Baja's debut novel is a poignant tale to say the least. She has a compelling ability to write about and portray daily life in her hometown of Amritsar, India. She captures the culture and transfers it into words that make you feel YOU are THERE, in Amritsar. We could hear the sounds, see the sights, smell the smells and listen to the people

One can find here, at the same time, an emancipated woman and her emaciated counterpart. But the women in India cannot confidently embrace their own power unless they balance the disparity between the economic classes and free all women from the strands of victimization. What women want and need today is a secure gainful employment, the right to equal work, the right to make decisions about their bodies and sex lives without moral intimidation, and the right to be treated as full human beings even if we are not beautiful, skinny, fair and wealthy. The Sari Shop through its women characters presents before its readers the microcosm of India and opens our eyes to the real India of the twenty first century.

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