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Classical study of Rupa Bhajwa's novel with special reference to the Marxist theory

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Abstract

Rupa Bajwa through the protagonist Ramchand opens up a window to her world and presents a society which is full of snobbery, deceit and artificiality. A Society where rich people are enjoying all the privileges and are extremely extravagant and on the other hand it depicts a society where poor people are barely able to make both ends meet and are denied the very basic fundamental right to being. The story brings forth substantial insights into the contemporary Indian society and the constant struggles of a commoner for a better life, his desires, and aspirations and his failures and inability to fulfil his dreams. The band of realism that runs throughout the story brings us face to face with the realities of life, where a poor man the protagonist of the story better called a subaltern, is bound to suffer and leads a mundane life of misery after all his efforts end up in nothingness. Ramchand a salesman at the Sevak Sari House and Kamla, wife of Chander are the representatives of marginalised people. Rupa Bajwa's "The Sari Shop" set in the little city of Amritsar captures evocatively, the social atmosphere of smalltown India.

Keywords: Novel, Rupa Bajwah, Marxist theory etc.

Introduction

Novel appeared as a form of literature in 18th century England, but for India it is a new genre as K.R Iyengar quotes that, "For the novel, properly so called, we have to wait till later half of 19th century." Influence on Indian English novel was quite obvious. Indian novels were heavily influenced by western culture and novelists successfully employed European techniques for expressing their spirit and sensibilities. Indian English novelists have expressed social concerns, realism, hopes and aspirations through their works. Though love for novel began with the introduction of English language but it began emerging as a genre with the spread of English education in the mid 19th century. Major historical incidents particularly Indian struggle for independence movement and other such historical incidents, encouraged the growth of Indian English novel. The novelists initially dealt with these issues in order to bring social awareness. The first half of 20th century has been rich and fruitful period for the Anglo Indian novels with immense influence of the epoch making political, social and ideological changes because of Gandhian movement.

First generation novelists

Indian writers initially were attached with their regional and local languages. They believed that English language does not suit the intellectual makeup of Indians and therefore it should be avoided and should go back along with Britishers. However, in latter part of 19th century, a change of opinions occurred when people admitted that learning English would no longer mean that we are European slaves rather it is a wonderful window and throws open a wide range of Social, political, cultural scene by which we have gained immensely. Also because it was an official and bring court language was used extensively all over the country, it became very popular among Indian people. Pramod K. Singh says, In the mid 19th century, "Raja Ram had initiated social reform programmes and in the process, he favoured the English language for spreading the wealth of information and culture available in British publications. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, though a master of Sanskrit, Persian and Arabian languages, felt that all renaissance knowledge was compiled mainly in European languages." Then further contribution to the literary field was made by Dutt family, especially Toru

Dutt and Ramesh Chander Dutta as English writers contributing more to the literary field. Furthermore, contribution of Rabindra Nath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo is also unique. Manmohan Ghose, Lal Bihari de, Sardar Banerjee, Laxmi Devi and others helped grow the Indian English writings by genres like novels and short stories. Social, detective and historical novels were mostly written. Novels with social themes and historical romances were more popular. Thereafter during 1920-1950, writers like R.K Narayana, Khushwant Singh, Mulk Raj Anand wrote with unlimited and diverse themes. Political emancipation and social criticism were mostly used themes. Also the mythical Indian traditions have been in the novels of R.K Narayan and Raja Rao. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee is rightly considered as the father of novel in India. Krishna Kriplani estimates the role of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.

The second generation novelists

The writers written by 2nd generation writers dealt with more modern and realistic issues. Earlier, novels portrayed aspects of society, now focus was laid into exploring human psyche. The second generation writers made novel more subtle and philosophical. This change in the content further instigated the use of new technical devices especially Stream of Consciousness technique. Another technique used by novelists of 2nd generation was that of myth. It was used to highlight the novelists personal view of life. Most important figures in the second generation novels are R.K Narayan (1906-2001), who started his career as a novelist in 1935 by his first novel *Swami and Friends*. R.K Narayan's main focus is on Indian village community and not the urban mainstream.

Emergence of postmodern period

It is difficult to define postmodernism. However, it can be defined as a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices using concepts like difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyper reality to make unstable other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the fixed nature of meaning. The term "postmodernism" first appeared in the philosophical discourse in 1979, with the publication of *The Postmodern Condition* while including a wide variety by Jean François Lyotard. In a variety of approaches and disciplines, postmodernism is mostly defined by an attitude of skepticism, irony, or rejection of the grand narratives and ideologies of modernism, often questioning various assumptions of Enlightenment rationality. Therefore, common targets of postmodern critique include Universalist ideas of objective reality, morality, truth, human nature, reason, science, language, and social change. Postmodern thinkers often call attention to the socially determined nature of knowledge claims and belief systems, placing them as products of particular political, historical, or cultural narratives and hierarchies. Accordingly, postmodern thought is widely characterized by tendencies to self reference, epistemological and moral relativism, pluralism, and irrelevance. Postmodern critical methods gained popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, and have been used in different academic and theoretical fields, including cultural studies, philosophy of science, economics, linguistics, architecture, feminist theory, and literary criticism, as well as art movements in fields such as literature, contemporary art, and music. Postmodernism is often linked with schools of

thought such as deconstruction, post-structuralism, and institutional critique. Postmodern literature cultural and historical evolution and has been seen as a particular way of a portrayal of the postmodern life and culture. It depicts a crisis of identity of human being and its effort for legitimization in a hypocritical world. This theme was dealt with other writers earlier, but it began to be treated much more systematically after the Civil Right Movement in the USA in the 1960's (Martin Luther King, ethnic and sexual/homosexual and lesbian minority rights), the Vietnam and student protests in Europe and the USA. While this wave led to democratization of the public life, more prerogatives, education and publishing avenues for marginalized in the Western nations, the East and Central European countries became less democratic under the influence and control of the USSR, especially between the 1950's-1980's. With increase employment, educational and public opportunities to find a space in the society, new authors representing minority ethnic (in addition to quite well established Jewish especially Native American, Asian and Black American and Hispanic-- American authors, American authors), gender (female), sexual (gay, lesbian) started to gain an important position in American literature, for example. Later same development could be seen in British, Australian and Canadian writings in which the writers coming from different backgrounds, mostly former British colonies, started to emerge English fiction; or the writers of formerly oppressed nations or races. In literary theory and criticism, it was actually the emergence of feminist and postcolonial theories which was a consequence of this development.

Rupa Bajwa as a postmodern writer

Rupa Bajwa, India's new literary find created commotion in the realm of contemporary Indian English fiction with the appearance of her debut novel, *The Sari House* (2004). Born in Amritsar, Punjab in a Sikh family, she started her writing career as a book reviewer and columnist in various famous publishing concerns such as *The Telegraph*, *The Tribune* and *India Today*. She writes immense reviews and articles. One of her articles entitled: *Dark Things Do Happen in Gurdwaras* brought her enormous criticism for the depiction of her own Sikh community. That rare creature, a writer who can interweave comedy and tragedy with perfection. Being a postmodern writer, she chooses not to write about fantasies and love stories, rather she portrays grim reality of things. Both of her novels *The Sari Shop* (2004) and *Tell Me a Story* (2012) aim at exposing the realities of life, the gruesome class distinction and the snobbery of society. Both these works are set in her hometown Amritsar and depict the plight of poor people or so called lower strata in the society. Rupa Bajwa's debut novel won her Sahitya Akademy award and was also shortlisted for Orange prize for fiction. *Tell Me a Story* was also received with a huge response. It is neither completely a story of the individual(s), nor it is based on the fairy tales. It is in fact, a surprising description of the events and happenings of the daily life of the major Indian middle class families with the delusions they have and sudden unexpected damage of their expectations. A part of its story satirized the citizens of New Delhi so it aroused serious deliberations amongst the literary circles in New Delhi. Coming from an ordinary Sikh family, Bajwa has spent the most of her life in the rented spaces of Amritsar. The novel *The Sari Shop* taken up for this present research

work is an outcome of her microscopic observation of her hometown. One finds in it a straightforward projection of class dynamics prevailing in Indian society, mortifying control of wealth, the bare and tedious subsistence of lower middle their discontented life in post-class people and independence era. Because of the unpretentious portrayal of the events and the characters of her hometown, the novel caught so much of attention among critics and reviewers.

Class struggle

Class struggle or class conflict is a tension or antagonism in society. It exists because different groups of people have different interests. It happens when richer section of the society (Upper class) pay wages to the worker class (the proletariat) to make things for them to see it. It is best described by Karl Marx when he says that workers had to work without any say in the business. While the working class had to work rigorously, the riches were making money in their lavish offices. In quest to earn money and make both ends meet, the working class had to abide by the demands of the bourgeoisie as a result of which rich continued to become more rich while as working class hauled. This struggle is called as Class Struggle and this emerged as a well known concept after the publication of The Communist Manifesto and Das Capital. If we trace out the history of class struggle, it dates back to the time when people lived in small communist societies. It was the time when society was based on common ownership and would not rely on money and social class. It was a time when people lived in classless society and when lone property they owned was from earth for themselves. Eventually people started to have slaves. With advent in time, feudalism started, where system of land ownership started. Under this rule all land was owned by the king. Then king would gift some of the land to the nobles who fought for him, and under this rule taxes were not paid with money. They were instead paid in products and by services. Finally in Karl Marx's time people in some countries were becoming bosses during the industrial revolution. The owners of machinery hired workers to help them make money by utilising the time and energy. Karl Marx revolted at this idea because he believed that workers were not paid the amount they deserve. The Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx begins by addressing the issue of class struggle. Marx writes that history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. He asserted that all over the world a norm is very common and that is the working class and the bourgeoisie class are in constant opposition to each other. This cold war is both overt and covert. Somewhere it is hidden while at other times it is open. However, the outcome of this fight is either a revolutionary reconstruction of society or in classes' common ruin. The manifesto further shows how the upper strata is the product of many revolutions in the mode of production and of exchange. The development of Bourgeoisie began in the earliest towns and gained momentum with the age of exploration. Since, feudal guilds could not provide for increasing markets, and the manufacturing middle class took its place. However, markets kept on growing and so did the demand, the manufacturer could not keep pace. This led to the Industrial Revolution. Now, Manufacturer was replaced by "Modern Industry" and middle class was replaced by "Industrial Millionaires", the modern bourgeoisie. As soon as modern bourgeoisie class started progressing, the medieval classes

were pushed to the background. With advancement in modern industry, the bourgeoisie had gained political support. Marx argues that classes are denied in terms of their relationship to the instruments of production and distribution of wealth. Essential to Marx's thesis are ideas of class conflict and class consciousness and both of these arising from the awkward comparisons that can be made between class membership and power. Long ago Marx had predicted that there will be polarisation of classes along the lines of "haves" and "have-nots". Those who have the opportunity of owning the means of production i.e Capitalists will be alienated from those who sell their labour in market basically "have nots". The have only have labour to sell do not have any property but they which becomes a product in the market. With this class distinction, class consciousness will increase leading to further conflict. Marx apart from this class distinction further discusses the concept of Alienation which he believes is inevitable with class distinction. He asserts that both these classes are necessarily alienated, though felt is different.

The different elements of Marxism in literature in literature

1. The element of class struggle in literature

Marxism is best known for the theory which has been expressed in 'The Communist Manifesto': "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." (2). When we take into account the fundamental philosophy put forth by Marx and Engels in the Manifesto we come to know that they have tried to point out that the ingenious ability of man or the creative history of man has its concern with the present day economic history. In a sense, Marx's theory of class struggle is a central part of Marxism, which has certain link with the power of creativity of man.

Marx and Engels have also pointed out that the methods of production, the production relations and the class struggle etc. have given rise to certain social systems in human society and those are classified as 1) The primitive society 2) The slave society 3) The feudal system 4) The capitalist system 5) The communistic system

The aspect of revolution in literature

One of the most important aspects of literature is Revolution. Conflicts. Karl Marx and Engels opine when the working class men find that they are unable to get what they are entitled to get in the form of profit from the united and raise their voice against capitalists, the working class people get the repressive policies adopted by the capitalists. In order to struggle against the well established capitalists, the working class people take the weep on of revolution in their hands, and they fight unitedly and force capitalists to approve their demands. The weapon of revolution has been the used by the poor class against the rich. It has been used by the lower and underprivileged people against the upper strata, the well also been used by the farm established aristocrats and the bourgeoisies. It has labourers, landless labourers against the landlords. Even the slaves are no exception to it. They have also undertaken revolution and have attacked upon the noble class people.

The aspects of man's struggle against exploitation and injustice in literature

The division of society in class system gave rise to two different classes, the upper class and the lower class or the

privileged ones and Marginalised ones. The upper class people, the aristocrats have always tried to exercise their control over the poor and the neglected class. Since the means of production have been in the hands of landlords, industrialists and capitalists, the workers and farmers' class has become merely a tool in the hands of these well established people. In the system of production, these upper class men have always tried to care for their own interests in selfish manner. They have made the labourers to work more and produce more. However, the income and profit which they would get at the cost of the physical and mental labour in producing a thing, was never disturbed by the labourers' used among the workers. In fact, the profit was expected to go into the pocket of the workers class. But they were deprived of their due income and profit. It was but an exploitation of the working class. It was a greater injustice done upon them by the established class people. The workers, farmers and labourers got aware of their economic and social exploitation and they raised their voice against exploitation, injustice and oppression in order to make the society free from exploitation, injustice and oppression. These classes resorted to the weapons of struggle and revolution in the demonstration, lock forms of war, ups, strike etc.

The sense of humanism reflected in literature

Since the advent of the class human civilisation, the lower class have struggled a lot for system in every social system through revolution and ending struggle. They have hoped for the betterment of human society. They have always aimed at the betterment of all. They have felt the sorrow and misery of their fellow brothers. They have observed the wretched living and working farmers. They have also witnessed the conditions of workers, labourers and physical, mental and social harassment of the lower class people.

Class struggle portrayed in Rupa Bajwa's select novels:

The Sari Shop and Tell me a story. , As I have discussed in Chapter 2 that philosopher Karl Marx was primarily a theorist, an economist and a historian who discerned human history as a series of class struggles. Marxist critics who study literature as a reflection of the social institutions, base their writings on the theories of socialism propounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marxist critics focus on the relationship between economic conditions of people in a society and cultural practices. The material life and economic status of people effect their social relations. Marxist critics believe that the productive forces and relations of production form the economic base which causes different social institutions such as education, family, law, politics and aesthetic ideas. The institutions and beliefs arising out of the base are called superstructure of the society. They also believe that the superstructure is influenced by base. According to Karl Marx, "The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their social existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. "(Political Economy) the practices of economically richer and powerful class serve as the standards which the subordinate classes long to follow. The beliefs and practices of dominant Culture. "Economic class are termed realities remain the base upon which the superstructure as culture of culture is built." The language, lifestyle and idiosyncrasy of dominant class serve as the

standards. The economically powerful class seeps these standards in the form of popular culture that the lower order or working classes struggle to achieve. Karl Marx says, "The ideas of ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its r i.e the class ruling intellectual Force.

The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production"(German Ideology) 1. Karl Marx was one of the first to focus mainly on social class and according to him one's social class dictated one's social life. The upper class people enjoyed all the facilities of life, while those in the lower class lived lives of hardship and poverty. Rupa Bajwa's debut novel 'The Sari shop' (2004) and 'Tell me a story' (2012) present picture of urban India profoundly and in a very realistic manner. Both of her novels are set in Amritsar, her hometown in Punjab. In 'The Sari shop' she sets into proximity two different classes of society and exposes pomposity, pretence and vacuousness of high middle class and pathos and struggle of working class for survival. The characters of two different worlds meet at one platform that is Sevak Sari Shop. The salesmen belong to the struggling world and the customers who are rich ladies of business and service class live in luxury and facade. According to conflict theory, social delamination benefits the rich and powerful at the expense of the poor. Thus, it creates a system of winners and losers that is maintained by those who are on the top and by those who have power. The people who are losers do not get a fair chance to compete, and thus are stuck on the bottom. This Concept is very well portrayed in both of the Rupa Bajwa's novels. Her debut novel "The Sari Shop" revolves around the protagonist Ram Chand, who has long lost his parents when he was just six, and then as fate had it, his family property was taken by his uncle who was expected to raise him but happens to turn other way round. Deprived of all necessities of life he landed up becoming a salesman in one of the sari shops in Amritsar. In the opening scene the whole scenario of the Amritsar town is depicted: the busy people around, some fighting and some hurriedly buying the things and others don't bother even to know why and how about the fight. In the mid of this Ram Chand finds himself getting late to his work place so he is seen scolding himself when he warmed water for his bath on the kerosene stove, fumbling with the buttons of his shirt and spilling hair oil on the air key stuck in it. Easy dirty floor. Finally, he ended up misplacing the heavy iron lock, along with the this depiction suggests that the job is important to Ramchand, without being overwhelmingly so. In other words, while he is scared of losing the job, it is not as if he is in an important and responsible position and needs to be on his toes all the time. Therefore, he could afford to forget his job and get late for work. However, the verbs 'fumbling' and 'spilling' suggest that he was in a hurry, and intent on getting to the office. This behaviour is no different from the demeanor of others in similar positions. In the novel, Bajwa depicts Ramchand leading a dreary life. However, he does not have too much of an issue with it as he is used to it. He is seen creepy dropping things all over the place, with hustle and bustle he gets to the shop, with a feeling lodged inside, but had to face scolding from his boss, Malik Mahajan which was inevitable. "Trying to break the place? Coming late? You think I don't notice? Am I blind? Stupid? Hunh? You think a shop can run like this? You will come and go as you

please? Are you a king or something? Raja Ramchand? Should we send an entourage or baggi to pick u up every day?" (2 is not unique in any way; b) Thus, Ramchand ut an ordinary man at the beginning of the novel. Bajwa further stresses on this ordinariness by speaking about everyday lower class household items such as kerosene stove, hair oil, and heavy iron lock. These along with sordid adjectives such as 'dirty' create a picture of a squalid house. This squalidness is highlighted later in the novel, when Bajwa itemizes what Ramchand had bought in the last eleven years. Ramchand had, in the course of the last eleven years, acquired a chair, a low stool, two buckets and a mug, two plastic soap cases one for Lifebuoy soap and the other for a Rin detergent bar — a doormat, and a small mirror on the wall that looked very old. He kept meaning to get curtains too, but hadn't got around to doing so. The money fell short every month.

Conclusion

The Sari shop (2004) is a debut novel of Rupa Bajwa. The author has used a very simple language and the character portrayal is also very realistic. This novel heralds the arrival of a writer who combines a profound sensitivity with humor and unflinching honesty. This novel is extremely heart breaking, very real and beautifully depicts a modern world in which hope and violence are permanently entwined. Since my dissertation is based on class struggle so my main concern is to make an attempt to probe into the harsh realities of man's existence on earth and how the class differences affect a man's life and make his survival even more difficult. It is an attempt to explore the struggles of a common man and his desperate efforts and failures to live up to the standards set by the rich. The story of a commoner who wishes to identify himself with the rich and struggles to be like them but ends up disappointed and disgusted with the kind of treatment given to people like him for instance, Kamla, a character in the novel. Rupa Bajwa through the protagonist Ramchand opens up a window to her world and presents a society which is full of snobbery, deceit and artificiality. A Society where rich people are enjoying all the privileges and are extremely extravagant and on the other hand it depicts a society where poor people are barely able to make both ends meet and are denied the very basic fundamental right to being. The story brings forth substantial insights into the contemporary Indian society and the constant struggles of a commoner for a better life, his desires, and aspirations and his failures and inability to fulfil his dreams. The band of realism that runs throughout the story brings us face to face with the realities of life, where a poor man the protagonist of the story better called a subaltern, is bound to suffer and leads a mundane life of misery after all his efforts end up in nothingness. Ramchand a salesman at the Sevak Sari House and Kamla, wife of Chander are the representatives of marginalised people. Rupa Bajwa's "The Sari Shop" set in the little city of Amritsar captures evocatively, the social atmosphere of small town India. Her narrative encapsulates the spirit of the sari shop environment with its spirited, intimate, interaction between shop personnel and regular patrons. In the background, the rustling silk, soft cotton and shiny synthetic saris reach out to us so realistically that we long to hold and caress them in our hands. Apart from that, the abysmal poignancy of Ramchand, an assistant in Sevak Sari Shop, whose world revolves around selling saris to the women customers,

deadens our heart with sorrow. Ramchand's life and his isolation in the indifferent world are effortlessly portrayed and we are drawn to empathize with his empty, monotonous existence. The characterization in the novel I feel is pertinent to the trivial rivalries that seethe beneath the surface of life lived by petty traders and class conscious, middleclass wives. The wives of rich industrialists with their empty lives and the educated class with their snobbish intellectualism, is skill fully caricatured. The lives of the lower middle class, their resigned acceptance of poverty, their escape into filmi world and their aspirations to higher things through English speaking jobs, brought a lump into my throat due to the streak of desperation that intertwined hope. Bajwa dramatically illustrates the class gap in contemporary India in her debut novel, focusing on the fortunes of Ramchand, a lowly, disaffected clerk in a popular sari she the shop's mostly upper op. The novel opens with Ramchand happily going about his duties serving class clients. Opportunity for advancement comes from an unlikely source when he attracts the attention of the beautiful, literate Rina Kapoor, whose family hires the shop to provide saris for her upcoming wedding. Inspired by his incursion into a wider world, Ramchand embarks on a half-baked self improvement effort that includes a reading program. In this dissertation I have tried to show that how the two worlds of striking inequalities do exist in Indian society where the women of upper class society take the lower class women as a dust on their feet and also the fact that even in elite strata of society, power of discussions are only controlled by males and elite women are only domestic maids. Rupa Bajwa's The Sari Shop turns the world of a small shop in Amritsar, India, into a microcosm of the society, allowing the author to explore big ideas within an intimate environment. Exploring the lives of ordinary shop salesmen, both at home and at work, as they struggle to make ends meet, she juxtaposes them against some of their wealthy clients, highlighting dramatically the economic contrasts in their lives and the differences in their expectations. From her opening description of the raucous awakening of a small neighbourhood, she presents the kinds of homely details which make the setting easy to visualize, despite the cultural differences.

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