



## The intersection of feminism, Marxism and capitalism: A critical analysis

Isha Tyagi

University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

### Introduction

Alison M. Jaggar in her definition states that “Marxism is a theory of development of class society, of the accumulation process in capitalist societies, of the reproduction of class dominance and of the development of contradictions and class struggle” (173). Therefore it can be affirmed that Marxism has always been centered upon class and economic structure prevalent in the society where people are distinguished in accordance to the work they execute and thus is described as “gender blind” by Heidi Hartmann. If one tries to analyze this set up from a feminist point of view then it can be determined that Marxism works in the interest of patriarchal structure, obscuring its baseless working through which they administer women. Therefore many critics have been struggling to deal with what Michele Barrett identify as the “woman’s question” in Marxism taking into account production, ideology, labor, class consciousness etc. through which they rebel against Marxist tendencies of dropping gender relations to just labor relations.

Friedrich Engels has given a persuasive account of women’s oppression where he sustains that women are not an oppressed segment in the proletariat class and that it is nothing but a very bourgeois phenomenon. In a pre capitalist society women had alike share in the production and equal access to the modes of production. But in the bourgeois class men became further mobile in their work hence, women had to be restricted to the domestic domain. He also holds that the system of nuclear family is equally responsible for women’s oppression, which is disseminated by capitalism for self interest. Women are overburdened and lonely in a nuclear family system and this also gives a chance to husband to exercise full control over his wife. It binds them and gives them fewer opportunities to carry out any constructive job outside the house. If the women are working then also they are twice as oppressed as they have to bear the burden of both household and work, from which males are free. If one observes the poem “Spelling” by Margeret Atwood in this light then one can conclude that women always have to dwell between the dilemma of profession and childbirth, they do not have the freedom to choose both. Therefore their desires and wishes are controlled by their male counterparts.

Evelyn Reed’s analysis is similar to Marxism which

appears to blame capitalism for this unjustified sexual distribution of labor. According to her, abusing women is not a result of patriarchal domination but a result of capitalistic agenda. It is capitalism which created this differences among the sexes. Nuclear family system amplifies the consumption in the capitalistic society which results in increasing their profit but it has crammed women’s life with loneliness and boredom. Marxism has often always dealt with a disjointed approach and plays with polarities, almost never gaining a unified proportion. It has deadened the feeling of being an utopian community as a whole. Rubin Gayle through her notion of “sex/gender system” elucidates that “social life [...] is the locus of the oppression of the women, of sexual minorities, and of certain aspects of human personality within individuals” (159) and that which perpetuates subjugation are the “specific social relations that organize it.” (168). She further explain the importance of household work maintaining that capitalism thrives on abusing the labor for profit and therefore to complete the production the reproduction of labor is also accountable. Therefore Marxism defines “food, clothing, housing, fuel” as the means of reproduction. But these are not readily accessible for use hence here comes the indispensable task of women who made these sources utilizable through household errands of cooking, cleaning etc.

Marxism deals with the seminal notion of “Consciousness Raising”. It basically states that members belonging to a specific class must witness the world according to their own class and their own standpoint. This particular idea is respected by feminists as they saw this as a medium of exchanging their feelings. It gives them a medium that acts as a vent to their feelings and problems and brings out what were considered as personal issues. Today’s ethnicity of feminist magazines is also in some way performing the similar task. Magazines are playing an indispensable role to give feminism a universal approach, which is not just restricted to women issues but with problems like economic issues, justice etc. In an interview Jessica Hoffman, the editor of “Make/Shift” magazine asserted that they essentially aim to bring forth the “shifting identities of feminist communities” and make people non - judgmental with a broader outlook. Magazines have always been energetic about bringing women’s issues forward and providing them with a voice.

The most significant tenet is that, in this vibrant capitalist society women may have diverse definitions of empowerment, it's not only about entering the working space, but even going out in the world to socialize, expecting respect at home etc., count as empowerment. In an issue of Diva Magazine a woman felt empowered by participating in Burlesque dancing which can be seen as celebration of femininity and aspiration.

Charlotte Bronte's novel Jane Eyre spurns all the three classes of the society together in its plot. Jane Eyre, the protagonist of the novel, an orphan, a spinster working class woman continuously trying to find her individual self. The Victorian times during which it was written had a strict class distinctions and the position of women was far less inferior than males, and they were the victims of a capitalist society. From the very beginning Jane, the protagonist is shown as rebel and she constantly questions the society as well as religion. She is often treated as somebody from lower class by her middle class aunt. Therefore she is sent to a charitable institution called Lowood. Here, she befriends Helen Burns who is accommodated according to the society and religion and never questions it. On the other hand Jane is similar to a Marxist and questions the authority that governs her life. Later, the difference between Jane and her lover is also clearly evident in the classes they come from. Wealth and status were the two governing bodies via which Rochester is the master and Jane is the employed. This demonstrates the Marxist point of view i.e. those who have means of production are the ones who accrue position in society. Marxism held capitalism responsible for the subjugation of women as it widened the sexual differences and has fashioned such material conditions which perpetuates patriarchal supremacy. Therefore, the ontological truth under capitalism is that it does not bid possibilities of constructing oneself and even manipulates it. It often commodifies one and therefore makes it complex to project it in its true essence. Similarly, women may be subjugated under capitalistic system but will never really internalize it, due to their role into social production. But capitalism is exclusively serving its own purpose through this entry as women are frequently paid less wages hence it enlarges the surplus profit of their employer.

Capitalism always identifies people according to the work they coddle in hence it instills in public, a sense of individuality. One may presume that Patriarchy and capitalism have conflicting interests. This is because patriarchy aims to hold an absolute control over means of production, and confining women to household. But, capitalism, for maximizing their turnover or profits includes women in the work force as well. Marxism supported very liberal ideals, which proved to be off beam as men still hold control over women's manual labor and the most significant reason for this is that in the capitalistic agenda women are paid less and as a result of

this they are forced to stay at home. In many sectors women are also sexually abused in order to restrain them from being successful. But Women's role in capitalism is significant for other reasons as well, as their procreation responsive body has the ability to produce the workforce for capitalism therefore obligated to be given due credit. I will here make an attempt to recount Marx's theory of alienation to Capitalist agenda. Marx states that labor in former times were much more associated with the product they produced, and women had equal share in production. But in capitalist society labor is often estranged from the product they produce and have no use value associated to it. They do not have any access to the product furthermore they are continuously supervised and have no control over the means of production. This rolls them away from their very human nature. Therefore it is this ideology of controlling women that needs to be reconstructed. It is the Margaret Benston's approach with which I diverge while the discussion of domestic work where she states that domestic work sustains the whole industrial economy and must be given a consecrated position because it connects women with their work and also reduces the sense of alienation. Household for them then becomes a place of connectivity, warmth, belongingness, joy etc. But, life buttoned up with the domestic work is something which separates one from the industrial work and is one of the prominent factors of economic dependency. Hence, women's liberation depends on their just entry into the domain of capitalist production.

If one talks about reconstruction of ideology then it must be understood that ideology plays an indispensable part in forming a set of ideas and practices in society. Therefore it can be established that even the question of gender division is located in ideology. Gender ideology is predominantly based upon values, beliefs, knowledge systems and gender based division of labor which results in natural oppression of women. Cultural symbolism or representation of women is essential in shaping an ideology. Ideology gets fashioned and concretized in day to day cultural practices. But, the concentration of gender must not be exclusively ascertained through how culture and its images showcase it. For example, An inadequately clothed woman in a cement ad with an ideology of having higher sales or female models are looked upon as someone of questionable characters because of this embedded ideology only, which needs to be changed. Ideology plays a part in the industrial sector as well where they are not considered as productive and competitive as compared to men and hence ideology becomes the instrument in oppression of women once again.

Ideology is important in serving an individual to carve his or her identity in society. Women thus must give away the male identified ideologies and alter and rise above the circumstances for themselves. Marxist ideology

is frequently considered as “sex - blind” (Barrett Michele 8) only concentrating upon class, hence they never really take into account domestic oppression of women. It is the work of ideology that women go through sexual division of labor and also the societal system where they gain social status due to their husbands but are not able to hold the means of production. Therefore it is essential on the part of women also to rebuilt themselves and reform their mind set and see feminist agendas not only as a political movement but also as something inherent in everyday life.

Theodor Adorno, the Frankfurt School philosopher draws an outlook and states that “the feminine character, and the ideal of femininity on which it is modeled, are products of masculine society” (O’Neill Maggie). Through this declaration Adorno talks of social organization of sexuality, where a female is constructed by the society and patriarchy. In today’s society, the very notion of being and individual has been imprecise. Jessica Benjamin even states that the very “postures” of master and slave are being designed in the society, where boy is the subject and girl is the object. But Adorno also talks about the position of women under capitalism where they have misplaced the sense of freedom both at social and economic level and to add to its hardship also at heart and emotion. This is because they have been socially designed to be so staunchly. Therefore, sexual difference that exist today as is generated through social practices within social relations and not in an imagined exclusivity.

In his essay, “Forms of Capital” Pierre Bourdieu determines about cultural capital which an individual gains and is something essential to his character by changing external wealth. Cultural capital is acquired through time and even differentiates one person from another. It is then to be noticed that patriarchy even holds power over forms of cultural capital. For example, Wives are expected to hold some sort of cultural capital in running the household, upbringing their children etc. but this also separates them from the economic base and thus the domain of professional proficiency is taken over by men and hence discrimination and inequality perpetuates as the cultural capital of women in maintaining the household within the limits of the budget and of same sorts is completely overlooked in industrial domain.

Capitalism deals with economic aspect of things basically, here sex can be seen as a means of reproduction which is needed for the rejuvenation of the worker. Therefore on this whole code of releasing the stress and gaining pleasure is what the whole porn industry depends on. If one investigates, one aspect of the society may claim that what commands human beings is nothing but commodification, and the visibly evident can be witnessed these sexually explicit films. In these movies, the images of female body are attached to

consumerism and consequently have become exemplars of consumer choice. One may presume that today beauty accommodates slightest subjective freedom for a woman, by tumbling her to the identity of an object, to ignite the erotic interest of viewers and gain penetration. The quintessence of being a woman is thus lost. These sexually explicit movies also aggravates the sense of indifference towards women as it depicts little or no intimacy between man and woman rather it’s just the gratification of sexual needs. In the modern capitalist society women seek this particular profession as an option because they consider it profitable for survival due to the dogma that nudity is still something which is looked upon as a desired object. This can further be explained through the painting of Mona Lisa, where there are only numerous masks given to it by the society, that is, exclusively social construction. This concern makes feminists employ with body and fluid subjectivity. This kind of commodification and identification denies them any autocracy.

Taking the statement forward, a seminal aspect of the modern society today i.e. Fashion. Girls are considered apparent consumers of fashion, and thus are frequently termed as obsessed, or foolish for following the trends too much. But feminists often hold fashion significant as it offers a sense of individuality and also a sense of freedom of expression. It lets the body overcome its limitations and imparts a sense of uniqueness. Fashion in a sense frees one with a feeling of delight and relief from everyday humdrum affairs relating one to more intensely with social life. But capitalism frequently creates an attraction to the image of female body via fashion and creates a belief that women are narcissistic or self absorbed and have an obsession with the self, therefore it is this very obsession that capitalism aims for selling their products. Capitalism involves “imperialism of the imagination” (Sawchuk Kim 28) hence, tries to produce goods in accordance to the social reality which works for fashion industry as well. On the other hand women should transgress their social class or gender and form an identity of self.

Therefore, sexual divisions are not oppression, but the belief that women cannot transgress predefined framework for them. Feminism must not aim to change the attributes of men and women but should attempt to make the relations more communal among them therefore one may agree that capitalism is responsible for female oppression but grass is always greener on the other side hence one must try to look at positive side of everything that it has also given an prospect of progress to women. Everything must not have material base but valuation on emotional grounds is also necessary, which will avail a reasonable sensitivity towards the issues of the second sex and a perspective of change.

**Reference**

1. Barrett, Michelle. Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter. London: Verso, 1980
2. Donovan, Josephine. Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Tradition. 3<sup>rd</sup>. ed. New York: Continuum, 2000
3. Hoffman, Jessica, Yudacufski, Daria. Interview. "Contemporary Feminist Culture." By Haydee Jimenez, Elke Zobl. California, 2008. <[www.grrrlzines.net/interview/makeshift.htm](http://www.grrrlzines.net/interview/makeshift.htm)>
4. Jagger, Alison M, Rothenberg, Paula S. Feminist Framework: Alternative Theoretical Accounts Of The Relations Between Money And Men. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: McGraw- Hill Company O'Neill, Maggie, Adorno: Culture And Feminism. Sage Publications 1999
5. Sawchuk, kim. A tale of inscription/fashion statements. Canadian journal of political and social theory. 1987, xi
6. Engles Revisited: New Feminist Essays. Sayers, Janet, Evans, Mary. London: Tavistock Publication 1987
7. Sim, Stuart. Post Marxism: An Intellectual History. London: Routledge 2000