

Discourse of Desire: Application of the Paradigms of Socialist Feminism to the Indian Context

Aiswariya G

Govt. Guest Lecturer, Department of English, Sree Narayana College for Women, Kollam
Email- aiswariya@gmail.com

Abstract

In India, the concept of “equality” was completely alien until liberally exposed Western-educated Indians introduced it in the early nineteenth century. However, the term did not gain meaning or become an operational principle in Indian life until the country gained independence in 1947 and adopted a democratic government. The Indian constitution then granted equality and freedom from discrimination based on gender or religion, and guaranteed religious freedom. Also, seven Five Year Plans were developed to provide health, education, employment and welfare to women. The sixth Five Year Plan even declares women “partners in development”. The history of feminism in India is regarded as mainly a practical effort and very limited in scope. Pre-colonial social structures and women’s role in them reveal that feminism was theorised differently in India than in the west. Colonial essentialization of “Indian culture” and reconstruction of Indian womanhood as the epitome of that culture through social reform movements resulted in political theorization in the form of nationalism rather than as feminism alone. Historical circumstances and values in India make women’s issues different from the western feminist rhetoric. The idea of women as “powerful” is accommodated into patriarchal culture through religion. This has retained visibility in all sections of society; by providing women with traditional cultural spaces. This paper focuses on the institutions and social practices of capitalism as these affect women, and attempts to understand the relations of gender and class in the course of social change in India down the ages. The paper also studies how socialist feminism serves as a discourse of desire expressing the female interest.

Keywords: Capitalism, Socialist feminism, Gender Inequality, Patriarchal Dominance



“When Men are Oppressed It’s a Tragedy. When Women are Oppressed It’s Tradition”

Socialist feminism is a young feminist movement, born in the 1970's. But despite the three hundred year age difference, socialist feminism retains many of the same goals as the first feminist movements. Socialist feminists see the problem as a combination of male domination and class exploitation. Real liberation is impossible as long as power and wealth in the world is monopolized by a tiny minority, and economic and social life is ruled by their lust for profits.

Socialist feminist analysis arose out of an attempt to broader theories of social change, primarily historical, materialist theories. Indian socialist feminist scholars and activists have to struggle to carve a separate identity for feminism in India. They define feminism in time and space in order to avoid the uncritically following Western ideas. Indian women negotiate survival through an array of oppressive patriarchal family structures: age, ordinal status, relationship to men through family of origin, marriage and procreation as well as patriarchal attributes – dowry, siring sons etc. – kinship, caste, community, village, market and the state. It should however be noted that several communities in India, such as the Nairs of Kerala, Shettys of Mangalore, certain Maratha clans, and Bengali families exhibit matriarchal tendencies, with the head of the family being the oldest women rather than the oldest man. Sikh culture is also regarded as relatively gender-neutral.

Socialist feminists propose the complete eradication of all political, economic and social foundations of contemporary society. Specifically, education, work, sexuality and parenting must undergo thorough transformations. Sexual division of labour, which locks men and women into stereotypical occupational categories, must cease. Women should be permitted, respected and valued for all types of work within traditionally male as well as female fields, and adequately compensated for such work.

In general, in the uneducated and rural section of the Indian society, which forms a major percentage of the total population, women are seen as economic burdens. Their contributions to productivity are mostly invisible as their familial and domestic contributions are unfairly overlooked. Indian women were contributing nearly 36 percent of total employment in agriculture and related activities, nearly 19 percent in the service sector, and nearly 12.5 in the industry sector as of the year 2000. The unfortunate reality is that the high illiteracy rate among women confines them to lower paying, unskilled jobs with less job security than men. Even in agricultural jobs where the work of men and women are highly similar, women are still more likely to be paid less for the same amount and type of work as men.

Feminists believe in women being treated as equals to men and socialists believe that the wealth and resources of the world should be equally distributed among all people. Clearly these two ideologies have a similar thread in the fight for equality. Socialist feminists see capitalism as a major factor in women's oppression, as well as in the oppression of other minority groups. Socialist feminists believe that capitalism is only one of many intertwined factors that contribute to women's oppression. Capitalists are always in search for new markets where they can control more resources and make more profits.

Technological advances and the growing size of global corporations' profits, has led to a globalization of the labour market resulting in outsourcing manufacturing jobs from more advanced capitalist countries to places where workers can be paid as little as possible. Here mostly young women and girls work in the worst of the sweatshop conditions for meagre wages. The businesses then take the products and sell them for super-profits in the advanced industrial nations. There in the advanced capitalist countries, workers who have had to look for jobs in the unskilled service sector due to the manufacturing jobs leaving often have misplaced resentment for the overseas workers who are being super-exploited.

In addition to working in sweatshops, young women and children around the world are often forced into the sex trade. Often it is seen as the only way to help support herself and/or her family. The sex industry is sometimes painted as being liberating and feminist. In reality, the global trade of human beings is far from liberating and pro-women. It is yet another unfortunate side effect of a world based on profits and not on basic human need. Women and children often are turned over for profit in order to meet their needs and that of their family. The overwhelming economic ties to the selling of a human's body are undeniable and as long as economic necessity is the driving factor, the sex industry cannot be liberating and has more akin to slavery than salvation. Sex work often does walk a line between liberation and oppression that is blurry with so-called feminist pornography, etc.- however, as long as sex work is based on economic need and sexist objectification of women it cannot be satisfactory as a venue for the liberation of women's sexuality. Women can only be free when they are truly in control of their own bodies, desires and destinies. This is impossible under a wage-profit system, but is possible under an economy based on human needs. When a woman's sexuality is based solely on her own desires and not on the need for economic security, she will be free.

Socialist feminists agree with the idea that gender roles need to be abolished. But they see gender and sexuality as social constructs both capable of transformation. While they acknowledge that biology does play a role in determining personality, anatomy does not confine or limit our capabilities as human beings on an emotional or a physical level. Acknowledging sexism in daily life and attempting to challenge and eliminate it through deconstructing mutually exclusive notions of femininity and masculinity as biologically determined categories opens the way towards an equitable society for both men and women.

In India, from birth itself, girls are automatically entitled to less; from playtime, to food, to education, girls can expect to always be entitled to less than their brothers. Girls also have less access to their family's income and assets, which is exacerbated among poor, rural Indian families. From the start, it is understood that females will be burdened with strenuous work and exhausting responsibilities for the rest of their lives, always with little to no compensation or recognition. Socialist feminists believe that the home is not just a place of consumption, but of production as well. Women's work within the home, having and raising children, as well as supporting men by doing cooking, cleaning and other forms of housework which permit men to work outside the home, are all forms of production because they contribute to society at large.

There are also many traditions and customs that have been a huge part of India and its people for hundreds of years. Religious laws and expectations, or "personal laws"

enumerated by each specific religion, often conflict with the Indian Constitution, eliminating rights and powers women legally should have. Despite these crossovers in legality, the Indian government does not interfere with religion and the personal laws they hold. Religions, like Hinduism, call for women to be faithful servants to God and their husbands. They have a term called *pativrata* that describes a wife who has accepted service and devotion to her husband and her family as her ultimate religion and duty. Indian society is highly composed of hierarchical systems within families and communities. These hierarchies can be broken down into age, sex, ordinal position, kinship relationships (within families), and caste, lineage, wealth, occupations, and relationship to ruling power (within the community). When hierarchies emerge within the family based on social convention and economic need, girls in poorer families suffer twice the impact of vulnerability and stability.

Aside from the sex industry, women are still treated as commodities in the media. The advertising industry in particular, objectifies women. Advertising plays on basic human emotions. Instead of selling products they sell an image, an idea, and ultimately a feeling. Often the motivating factor is sex. The saying “sex sells” is true. Everything from cars to beer uses women’s bodies to push the product. Often only parts of women are shown- her legs, her breasts, her backside- what is really seen as being important. When the entire woman is shown, she is poised as almost always being sexual. Advertisements for both men and women portray women as sexual objects. Even ad campaigns that seem to be progressive, such as the Dove Real Beauty Campaign where “real” beauties model in their underwear, Dove is still selling beauty and happiness (and literally are selling firming creams and lotion to the *natural* beauties).

Ideals of what women are supposed to be are no better on television shows, movies, in magazines or on the radio. Women are often represented as being there for heterosexual male pleasure. This can be seen in most instances of lesbianism in the media. Rather than being an expression of a woman’s own sexuality, it is often framed as being for a heterosexual male audience. Women are supposed to be thin, big breasted, submissive and yet aggressive, dominating but not too assertive. She should be independent, but always be looking for a man. In the case of women of colour they are often portrayed as fetishes. For example, African- American women are often portrayed as animalistic and Asian women are portrayed as submissive, naughty schoolgirls. The ideologies in the media are only a result of the society that shows them – in this case a capitalist society. Capitalism and oppression are so interconnected that women’s liberation cannot come without the abolishment of capitalism. No true egalitarian society could exist under a capitalist economy, because it is fundamentally dependent on backward ideals like sexism, homophobia, racism and to keep workers divided while a small minority on the top to get richer off of other’s labour.

A socialist woman is not a socialist first and a woman second or vice versa. One concern do not supersede the other. Instead, both the fight for women’s equality and for an egalitarian economy is of equal importance. Also it is important to note that feminists are male as well as female. We call ourselves socialist feminists and not feminist socialists, because while there are many takes on feminism – liberal, conservative, etc. yet there is no

such thing as a true socialist that is not also a feminist (male or female). This does not mean that one is more important than the next.

Under true socialism, the patriarchal family would cease to exist. No longer would women be expected to be the natural mother and housekeeper. The role of the family to provide love and support would instead be something that comes from the entire society. There would be no need for degrading advertising or media images, because the system would not profit from exploitation. All members of society would have an equal stake in all the world's resources. Human need would be the basis of the economy and not profits. With social ownership of the resources and means of production all members of society could take equal footing. No one would have to go without healthcare, food, water, shelter or education. There would no longer be any need to oppress women. Women could equally choose to be mothers or not, wives or not, and so on. Choice would truly exist.

Thus, the abolition of capitalism in and of itself is not enough to make a just world. There needs not only an international socialist movement, but within that movement women and other oppressed groups must have equal leadership, opportunities and respect. Women's liberation and the liberation of the working class are as interconnected as capitalism is to the oppression of women. They go hand in hand. The need of a strong women's movement in socialism and socialism in a women's movement is vitally important for the future of humanity. A revolution alone cannot guarantee equality. Women will never be able to be free under capitalism and socialism has no chance of ever truly existing if women and men are not counted as equals in the revolution and in the future society.

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About the Author



Aiswariya G is a Govt. Guest Lecturer, Department of English, Sree Narayana College for Women, Kollam, Kerala. She has published several articles and presented papers in National and International Seminars.