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## **Women And Class Struggle: A Marxist Feminist Perspective In The Sari Shop By Rupa Bajwa**

**Dr. Sheweta magotra** Research scholar, Department of English, University of Jammu.

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### **Abstract**

The present paper seeks to explore the female characters in *The Sari Shop* by Rupa bajwa in the light of Marxist feminism. The efforts and the way to women's emancipation is largely dependent on the type of the State and the particular association of class forces in any specific society. These forces are held accountable for the unequal status of women and the brutality against women, the everyday embarrassment and making of several blockades in women's struggles for freedom. This kind of recognition is important for the expansion of a tactic to attain women's emancipation. Women comprise half the population of the world yet majority of them are still considered worthless. The biggest aim of one's life is to have a prosperous life, access to education, good job and a decent social standing. Since everyone has a different status in their life, these social classes mark the distinction between the people. Discrimination is not a favourable action of anyone established on gender, race, or any other distinctiveness but it is rather considered as a hurdle to the accomplishment of the objectives of equality, growth, and harmony. From Marx's perspective, all social orders that have at any point existed are "class social orders" of some sort. The fundamental rights for both Women and men are equal regardless of gender, social status, race, or any other factors. As a consequence, women have all the right to live their life on their own terms

**Keywords:** Marxist Feminism, Social classes, oppression, gender.

### **Introduction**

Rupa Bajwa, in her novel *The Sari Shop*, depicts the journey of women belonging to diverse social classes. It also portrays their distinctive position in the society. The women characters undergo various experiences. Rina Kapoor is Ravinder Kapoor's daughter, the leading businessman in Amritsar. She is Masters in English Literature and is a budding writer. Bajwa depicts Rina Kapoor as a high class, well-read woman. She knows what she expects from her life and is audacious enough to voice her feelings: "I like to read, I like to explore new things, I like to take every day of life as a new experience ... I think life is an adventure. And when you explore life, you also explore yourself" (81). She is very enthusiastic about her writing and her still taking the time out for writing amidst the preparations of marriage is clearly indicative of that:

... yesterday I wrote another poem. One of the poems in which I find that I can express the true meaning of life. And do you know when I wrote it? While a man who brought over crystal bangles for me to see was waiting outside. I felt the urge and I knew that bangles could wait, but I needed to get the creative process going.

(81)

As a woman Rina Kapoor is subjugated in relation to gender. She is expected to abide by certain norms that any woman is supposed to. She even has to perform her duties as far as her gender is concerned. Belonging to an upper class status, her father and the society insist on her to get married to a rich man:

Ravinder Kapoor ... told the Guptas that his own daughter, Rina, was getting married in three weeks' time. He wasn't very pleased about it, because it was a Love Marriage, and his daughter had chosen to marry a Captain in the Indian Army. Ravinder Kapoor still couldn't believe it, but he had not tried not to let his disappointment show. (163)

The society she belonged to expected her to stay in the four walls after her marriage. The moment she pays visit to the Sari shop, everyone there gets awestruck. Conversely, Rina Kapoor's standing as someone belonging to a high class allows her the chance to chase her dreams. Sometimes it is important to take into consideration the experiences of an individual, be it good or bad. Rina, a high class product and having the access to education gave her the voice of her own: "I just hope I can achieve something. Make sense of things. In our strange, multi-layered society that is a very, very difficult thing to do" (93). She is brave enough to decide what she wants even in regards to her marriage shopping. Although her father is critical of her choice to marry someone from an army background yet she persuades him for the same. Rina not only chooses her life partner but also takes the lead by not succumbing to the family pressures whatsoever.

Rina did not want to be held in the clutches of society. Just three days after her marriage she visits the sari shop to seek some exploration for her novel and gets succeeded in publishing her novel. Due to her high standing in society, she is able to make her novel famous and also succeeds in drawing the attention of the people towards her book. Rina's status according to her gender is that of an oppressed woman, but according to her class is an oppressor.

The character of Shilpa is depicted as a docile and introverted girl. She is the daughter-in-law of Mr. Gupta who was a well-known businessman. Shilpa had no interest in studies but is still able to pass one year. She wasn't very confident about herself. Neither was her English good nor did she felt that she was beautiful. But she had the confidence that her father would arrange a best match for her. "The biggest thing in her favour was that her

father was a well-known, rich businessman. She had known they would find a brilliant match for her” (162). Eventually her parents do find a right match for Shilpa.

Shilpa gets married to Tarun Gupta. Tarun is a handsome and rich man. Shilpa had a very meek attitude towards her mother-in-law and she did everything in her capacity to please her. The latter could sense that in her and felt that she could be easily moulded. Shilpa was being instructed by her mother-in-law in almost everything. She taught her the way to dress, to cook as well as to present herself. It isn't that Shilpa was unaware of her mother-in-law's commanding attitude but somehow she felt that it was better than most of the other people's behaviour. Shilpa was a totally moulded and shaped person owing to her company but also she was aware of the fact that everything after her mother-in-law's death would be hers. The moment she discovers her pregnancy, she “fervently hoped it would be a boy. That would forever consolidate her position in the family” (166).

Here Shilpa becomes an emblem of materialism and stereotypical attitude of the upper class society hoping her unborn child to be a baby boy in order to have a hold in her husband's house. As a woman, she was expected to be an ideal and compliant daughter-in-law and as an upper class woman she had a relatively prosperous life. Not only this but her parents gave her and her husband luxurious gifts on their marriage in order to procure a good and comfortable life for their daughter.

Another female character in the novel is Mrs. Sachdeva, Head of the Department of English at a neighboring college. Mrs. Sachdeva is an independent and educated woman. Apart from some upper class ladies, she was respected by all for her familiarity with her subject. As a teacher, she envisages a stretch of capabilities in Rina Kapoor's character. She is a guiding force for Rina and encourages her to tread the right path. She advises Rina to pursue her career after marriage also: “I will watch your future progress with great interest. I do hope, Rina, that you will not let the mundane things of life take over the real things” (94). The time when Rina Kapoor finally publishes her work, Mrs. Sachdeva is tremendously glad about it as she always believed that professional identity for any woman is very important.

As a middle class woman, Mrs. Sachdeva is both the oppressed and the oppressor. Mrs. Kapoor reprimands Rina to not have the company of a middle class woman: “Really, Rina, now these people have started to come to our home also. We are friends with the highest status families in Amritsar . . . And just because of you, we have these ordinary, professor-type, service class women coming here” (91). As an oppressor she behaves when she expresses her derision about Ramchand, a shop assistant: “You can't really make these people understand, you know” (28). Belonging to the middle class section of society, Mrs. Sachdeva gets victimized when upper class women like Mrs. Gupta tattletale about her. Nonetheless, she gets several chances follow her career, to follow her dreams and to have a life fully controlled by her. It is pertinent to take into consideration both oppressions and privileges understand anyone truly.

Another character is Kamla. A deprived, working class and unqualified woman. Her father works in a factory and mother is a maid. After the demise of her mother, she starts to work as a maid in order to sustain the household. When she turns sixteen, her father marries her off to Chander who is also a factory worker. Since Kamla is someone who belonged to the less privileged section of society so she was not asked regarding her choice. After some time her husband Chander loses his job and begins to drink and hit her.

The violence she was subjected to and the seclusion made her already horrible life even more hopeless. According to Tong, “women’s alienation is profoundly disturbing because women experience themselves not as selves but as others”(102). She wasn’t allowed to work as her husband wanted her to bear children as soon as possible. Eventually, she does get pregnant and she some ray of hope enters her life. But as fate would have it and poverty stricken life resulted into her miscarriage. There was no support from her husband rather she was always blamed for all that happened in their life be it poverty or miscarriage. As a result of this, Kamla becomes an alcohol addict. She resorts to drinking and snapping at male folks in the locality. Obviously, the society accuses Kamla for everything. Even Chander’s friend Gokul depicts Kamla as “not a good woman” (119).

However, soon Kamla gets to know that the real culprits of her life were realizes that Mr. Gupta and Mr. Kapoor. As Chander was employed in their factory and when the factory was in the losses, they simply closed the factory sans paying the salary to the workers that was due for the last three months. All of this led to the poverty in Chander’s house as well as Kamla’s miscarriage. Angry and in drunk state, Kamla pelts stones at the house of Mr. Gupta and shrieks abuses and because of this she gets arrested. In the police station she is raped by the police constables. She is reckless because of her situation. When she hurls stone at Mr. Kapoor, he resolves to get her murdered. He even sends attackers to her house and they set her house ablaze with her inside it. The sufferings that the character of Kamla had to endure are the repercussions of her placing in the society. She deals with oppression because of her gender and class.

Thus, class and gender are reciprocally reliant in nature. In order to get through someone’s life course, an individual’s traversing situation in the society has to be well considered. The character of Kamla endures the most in the novel because of her marginalized position in society.

All the female characters in the novel *The Sari Shop* undergo the oppression of gender irrespective of their position, class as well as education. The experiences of the women characters and the level of the oppression differs for that reason. Rina Kapoor marries a rich upper class man. Her position as an upper class woman in the society, allows her to express herself and voice her opinions through her writing. Shilpa is sculpted and shaped by her mother-in-law. It is to be seen that Shilpa herself allowed her mother-in-law to mould her. Had it not been so, things would have been different. Her status as an upper class woman permits her to have a luxurious life. Mrs. Sachdeva is condemned for being childless but still

her position as a middle class woman allows her the prospect to concentrate on her career. It is because of this that she gets a lot of respect from the society for her accomplishments in her career.

Marxist feminism is the product of Marxism and feminism and this association of structure intends to release women by speaking about the circumstances that paved way towards coercion. Marxist Feminism explains the ways in which women are oppressed through society. It is built on the elucidation of Tong: "classical Marxist feminists work within conceptual terrain laid out by Marx, Engels, Lenin, and other nineteenth-century thinkers. They regard classism rather than sexism as the fundamental cause of women's oppression (96)". Marxist feminism emphasises on production, wherein men have subjugated production in society and women were mere objects, because of capitalism in society. Women, on the contrary do household chores which is regarded as domestic work. Marxist feminists implicitly opined that when capitalism is not used, women's oppression ends. According to Marxist feminism, the foundation of women's oppression and exploitation is the family. As a working woman also, she is expected to perform domestic duties such as cleaning the dishes and caring for the family. Therefore, women work twofold as tough as men, but still encounter a considerable income discrepancy or are not paid when working from home at all. Women are competent enough to provide for themselves. In line with Tong: "Always on call, women form a conception of themselves they would not have if their roles in family and the workplace did not keep them socially and economically subordinate to men. Thus, Marxist and socialist feminists believe we need to analyze the links between women's work status and women's self-image in order to understand the unique character of women's oppression"(98).

All the women characters had to endure a lot in the novel owing to the social classes to which they belonged. Their different and varying social classes paved the way to the kind of choices they were made to make and the ones they made on their own depending the class they all belonged to.

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