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Empowered To Be Ensnared

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Abstract: Empowerment of women in Indian society has been one of the parameters to quantify the ambitious process of emancipation. The 21st century has seen several milestones, including inclusive access to education and employment opportunities. In contradistinction to the widely avowed belief of the inextricability of the male as the patriarchal apotheosis, this article examines the puissant role that the female essays in the incessant perpetuation of patriarchy. The first section introduces the intent of the essay and the references on which the analysis is based. The second part brings to the fore the seamier side of intra-gender relationships. The cause célèbre for such viciousness in the association among females is explored in the third section. The fourth section poses questions about empowerment leading to entrapment. The conclusion focuses on how empathy is empowerment in the true sense of the term.

Keywords: Empowerment, Emancipation, Intersectionality, Patriarchy, Intra-gender relationships

Introduction

An equipollent existence is enamouring to all. Being idyllic, its pursuit and progress have been elusive to its proponents and practitioners. Incessant endeavours by feminist movements across the world to incorporate equality in the skewed gender ordonnance bore fruition through the enunciation of empowerment and emancipation. Leading lives in a patriarchal world, stepping out of domestic domains, to marking their presence as presidents of nations across continents, women have combated socio-cultural prejudices and crippling cul-de-sacs to achieve acclaim in their bailiwick. A collage of conquest, of women excelling in hitherto ring-fenced areas, presents a picture of persistent perseverance translating into stupendous success. Have such accomplishments empowered women? Or has such laissez-aller been a veneer, prodding women down the primrose path? This article is an attempt to explore whether empowerment has emancipated women or has it ensnared them. The analysis of the subject is based on examining intra- gender relationships in fictional and quotidian lived experiences through the theoretical perspective of intersectionality.

Of Manacled Mindsets and Malevolence

One is compelled to eschew the widespread assumption that patriarchy is perpetrated and perpetuated by men, on reading the novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* by Indian- Canadian author Anita Rau Badami. Gurpreet Kaur, a character in the novel, has the responsibility of managing her household with two daughters and an indolent husband, in the rustic hinterlands of Punjab. As a mother, she takes it upon herself to condition her daughters to perform domestic chores. The narrative presents a heart-wrenching portrayal of how young girls are schooled into stereotypical roles early in life. Gurpreet shouted from the kitchen... "Look at this princess! Servants she has! Maids and chaprasis! Sharanjeet. Wake up this minute,

or you will get a bucket of water on your face.” (Badami, 2007, p.5). Sharanjeet often thought: “Would she ever have the chance to sleep until the sun climbed into the sky?” (Badami, 2007, p. 5)

Every morning since she was four years old, she had to start the day by picking up the hot stinking shit that the family’s two cows dropped in the courtyard. Then she had to make balls of the disgusting mess and pat them into circular cakes against the walls of their house. And the smell- how the smell corrupted her waking hours and infected her dreams and ruined even her meals. (Badami, 2007, p. 6).

The inevitability of impeding stereotypical tasks, the five-year-old Sharanjeet cannot escape from, lies in her intersectional existence. The theory of intersectionality seeks to accentuate the multidimensionality and simultaneity with which categories of difference like race, gender and class generate discrimination and oppression in the lives of women. As Patricia Hill Collins puts it, intersectionality focuses on the interlocking aspect of race, gender and class constituting a matrix of domination. For Sharanjeet, the factors creating her labyrinth of oppression are her age, gender and class. As a young girl, she is dependent on her mother for her survival; being a girl, she cannot evade domestic chores; belonging to a social class deprived of economic affluence, she has no choice but to share the burden of household chores irrespective of her tender age.

The story of Rosa Schweers in the novel points to the malevolence she is subjected to by her mother-in-law Akka. Rosa is of European descent and deportment and is married to Hari Shastri, Akka’s son. Akka, the matriarch’s puritanical Brahminical outlook that cannot tolerate a daughter-in-law from a religion different from hers.

Akka made it clear to all that she thought that the foreign daughter-in-law was a disgrace to the family name, a conniving trollop who had snared her innocent son . She refused to call Rosa by her name or to acknowledge that she was married to Hari Shastri. “Go back!” Akka would hiss, “Go back where you came from, you piece of trash!” (Badami, 2007, p.79)

The anathema that Akka had towards her daughter-in-law is extended to her granddaughter Leela as well. The innocent child yearns for her grandmother’s affection, which the old woman showers on her grandsons but not on little Leela. “Half-breed”, Akka would mutter out loud. “Worse than an untouchable. At least a

toilet - cleaner has caste. But this girl, where does she belong?” (Badami, 2007, p. 82).

Rosa’s caste is inherited by her daughter Leela; their gender and dependent status intersect with each other, placing them at the receiving end of Akka’s malevolence.

The aforementioned instances, which constitute the narrative of *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, are a testimony to Bell Hooks’ statement that “Patriarchy has no gender”. It is obvious that two women in their roles as the mother and mother-in-law have intensely internalised and implemented patriarchal traits of

1. Hegemonic harassment
2. Slotting individuals into gender stereotypes
3. Abrogation of agency
4. Oppression and exclusion

Stepping out of fictional landscapes, if we are to look around us, our society is witness to gut-wrenching modern-day monstrosities, as was reported on 8 February 2023 on the NDTV news channel.

14-year-old kept as a maid, tortured with hot tongs, cut with sharp instruments, Gurugram couple arrested. Preliminary investigation revealed that the child could not sleep the whole night. She was not given food and was forced to eat leftovers from the dustbin. Her mouth was completely swollen, and her whole body was covered with injury marks.

The heinous crime against a defenseless teenager forced by her poverty to slog as a domestic help far away from home shines a light on how her tormentor, an empowered woman, financially independent used her empowered status not to empower a less fortunate being of her gender at her mercy but chose to cruelly push the hapless girl to the doldrums of disempowerment by maiming her with grievous physical and psychological mutilations.

Intra-Gender Animosity: The Raison d'être

The many milestones achieved in the struggle against gender discrimination are indubitably attributed to the united front that women across the globe have formed in solidarity for the cause. But down the years, the strength of sisterhood has been evidently attenuated. We live in a world where women's maliciousness towards women has turned malignant. In institutions or companies, female employees prefer men in positions of authority. If at all a fellow female employee manages to get to the top by breaking the glass ceiling, she must face inexplicable asperity. Women police personnel, instead of empathizing with rape victims, refuse to believe them. Female judges are sympathetic to their male plaintiffs in cases of domestic violence and lady doctors value their male patients over their female counterparts. The universality of this intra-gender antagonism prompted American psychotherapist and writer Phyllis Chesler to author the book *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman*, recording the findings of her research for twenty-one years on the subject. It was Dell'Olio, an Italian filmmaker and journalist, who was the first among feminists to have written about "Woman's inhumanity to Woman". Through her book, Chesler explores and exposes the vicious side of female relationships across the world. She states that in India, a survey confirmed that more than fifty per cent of the women questioned believe that wife beating is justified (Chesler, 2009, p.3).

In 2008, in Maryland, a female teacher was beaten by a disobedient female student who was cheered on by other students. The Black African girls and women of Darfur were brutally gang-raped in public, while the women who were wives of the rapists cheered them on... The feminist paradigm focused on women as victims, not on women as perpetrators. (Chesler, 2009, pp. xiv, xvi).

Speaking from her experience of masked and manifest malice that women bear towards women, Dorothy Allison declares "The women who hate me cut me/ as men can't." While Judy Grahn succinctly puts it, saying "No one can humiliate you like one of your own". The question that seeks an answer is what spurs such cannibalistic cruelty? Gloria Cowan reveals that "The data indicate that women who are hostile toward other women don't feel good about themselves". "They have lower personal esteem, optimism, sense of self-efficacy, life satisfaction and higher objectified body consciousness compared to women who are not hostile toward women" (Chesler, 2009, p.4). Author Bell Hooks gives an honest perspective when she exhorts all of us to "challenge the simplistic notion that man is the enemy, woman the victim (because) we all have the capacity to act in ways that oppress, dominate, wound." Therefore, it is the "potential oppressor within that we must resist" (Chesler, 2009, p.7). Chesler identifies the places and spaces that reek of female antipathy. She states:

The patriarchal family may not be a safe place for some women, not only because of male domestic violence but because women's hidden war against each other also begins at home. The harm may last a lifetime... Daughters are angrier at their mothers who failed to protect them from rapist father ... Women scientists rejecting project proposals submitted by female scientists for funding from the government. (Chesler, 2009, pp.10,13).

Delving into the intra- gender horizontal hostility, Finnish psychologist Kaj Bjorkqvist explains that “Indirect aggression is a type of hostile behaviour that is carried out in order to harm the opponent while avoiding being identified as aggressive” (Chesler,2009, p.92). Chesler cites innumerable instances of indirect aggression from schools and colleges to places of employment. She points out that girls in educational institutions commonly practice shutting others out of the girls’ group. Women in workplaces indulge in brazen backbiting, gossiping and assassinating the character of women who are more efficient than they are. Criticizing the other’s appearance, sartorial preferences, using social media to condemn the other and having no qualms about betraying trust when they unabashedly reveal secrets confided in them to a third person and trying to get others to dislike a person. Chesler makes a shocking revelation of insidious indirect aggression among young girls who engage in “exclusionary behaviour” in which an entire class will “ostracize” one female peer victim, forcing her to quit her studies or contemplate suicide. Chesler in her analysis hits the bull’s eye when she remarks that “Women are often quick to believe the worst about another woman through gossip” (Chesler,2009, p.151). This aspect finds reiteration in Roland Barthes’s observation that gossip is “Death by language”. Dwelling on the domino effects of gossip Lisa M. Glazer & Wahiba Abu Ras tell us that “Gossip is a mean-spirited act of verbal aggression” that leads to a spate of honour killings in the Arab world.

Gossip entails deliberate tarnishing of the victim’s character and satiation of the vengeance of the envious.

Inveigled Freedom

We live in paradoxical times where access to education and employment opportunities has empowered women to scale pinnacles of success but have also been a witness to spiralling violence perpetrated against women. Is freedom synonymous with empowerment then, not absolute but inveigled? The spine-chilling murder of Shraddha Walkar reported during January 2023 sent shockwaves through the nation. Shraddha, a young professional, had gone against her family’s wishes to live- in with her partner Aaftab Poonawala. Her murder was discovered six months after she was killed by strangulation by her live-in partner. Her dead body was dismembered into several pieces and stored in the refrigerator for months before being disposed of by the murderer in different locations. Even before we could recover from the shock of this gruesome murder, the newspapers carried news of Nikki Yadav, who too was strangled by her live-in partner Sahil Gehlot, whom she had tied the knot with, without her family’s knowledge. Her body had been stashed away in a refrigerator in an eatery owned by the convict’s family. While Nikki’s body was in the fridge, her killer got married to another woman. Nikki hailed from a village in Haryana and her ambition to equip herself with a good education had led her to venture out from the familiar terrain of her village to Noida which held greater opportunities.

Both the young women were empowered enough to make their choices in life. Having exercised their prerogative, what disempowered these unfortunate women from walking out of abusive and life-threatening relationships? Did their sense of empowerment absolutely abandon them even when they sensed that their lives were at risk? Having defied patriarchal norms of conventional marital relationships that require parental approval, why did these girls with their bold outlook on life allow themselves to perish in the patriarchal sinkhole of oppression and annihilation that their romantic union turned out to be? Did their empowerment lead them to be entrapped beyond redemption? Is empowerment then in this context progressive or regressive? If empowered choices lead to the decimation of self, then it is definitely regressive. When the robustness of empowerment braces one to unfetter oneself from toxic relationships courageously, it is progressive.

Conclusion: Empathy is Empowerment

Be it female-female antipathy that we face and inflict on others from our positions of privilege or informed choices in life that boomerang diabolically, such empowerment will lead us to be ensnared. True empowerment lies in practising empathy. A short movie “Pushpa - The Rapist” portrays this eloquently. The movie shows a mother preparing to receive her only son after seventeen long years of jail term for raping a five-year old girl. She cooks all his favourite dishes and waits eagerly for his arrival, for the day

also happens to be his birthday. She affectionately receives him and serves lunch. When he begins to savour his favoured dishes, the mother shoots him dead. She reasons that if his prurience would not spare a five-year-old, it wouldn't exempt her. She empathizes with the trauma the child had suffered and decides that snuffing out a rapist's life was the only way to do justice to the victim and safeguard others from a rapist.

Real empowerment can happen when we start "reigning in the enemy within" (Chesler, 2009, p.462). When we learn to be resilient resisters, we rule our lives and therein lies our true empowerment and emancipation.

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