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The Question of Gender and the Social Order: Re (Evaluating) their Construct

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Abstract

Germination of the theoretical concept of gender attributes itself to the presence of power relations in any social order. These power relations traditionally have been gauged on the order of the male-female dichotomy, leading to a sweeping reduction of the concept of gender to biology and patriarchy. While the very concept of patriarchy being dominant is not unfounded, it certainly over-simplifies the concept of gender. This over-simplification is a direct product of one of the salient causal features behind a Gendered Order being annulled: the power structure that works behind the entire gendered order. It is either negated or eschewed in favour of patriarchy as the primary cause. Even though it is explicit that gender is not a product of the biological, the dawning is yet to be firmly acknowledged, in literary practice as well as life, where it still is nothing more than male-female duality, featuring patriarchy as the foundation.

The paper tries to assess the primary cause of a Gendered Order, that goes beyond and deeper than patriarchy. An attempt shall be

made to elucidate how the Power Principle works and then seeps into other aspects of gender in the Social Order. The paper shall strive for it through various texts, temporally placed in the Modern milieu, but belonging to multifarious spatial dimensions. Alongside, the concept of the “Modern” shall be briefly assessed as gender, too has been classified into the traditional and the modern, on parameters of female subjugation and empowerment.

Keywords: Power Principle, Gendered Order, Oppressed Oppressor, Social Construct, Hierarchy

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Krishna Sobti's novel *Dilo Danish*, translated as *The Heart has its Reasons*, highlights the oppressive gendered social order the modern age is witnessing. Kripanarayan, defending his keeping a mistress, says:

“Society gives this status to men, Kutumb. Cursing is useless. Every man has a net in his hand. It is upto him to catch as many fish as he can with his daring and manliness” (31).

The women, his wife and mistress, on the other hand, are defined in relation to their fidelity to Kripanarayan. The incident is characterized as a salient evidence of male oppression and the subordinate position of women. However, the critique ‘conveniently’ overlooks that Kripanarayan, too, has to execute and perform all the duties due, not only to his wife and their children, but also the mistress and their progenies. He cannot evade these duties that he is bound to perform as the ‘master’ of the house.

This “larger dimension”, of the inescapable duties and limits of the male, finds space in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Considered to be the text of inception of Post-modernism in Indian Literature, the protagonist Saleem cannot and does not succeed in his advances towards his sister Jamila, the singer. Jamila, an “other” in the social order, pleases the members of the society. Being in Pakistan, a nation

significantly rigid in its demarcation of the male and the female territory, she does it by ‘satisfying’ the auditory senses of the audience, while remaining out of sight absolutely. Her “otherness” gets her to don the feminine duties, pleasing the masculine, the male, while staying out of the male gaze. However, in spite of all his masculinity, Saleem, the male, does not have his way with Jamila when it comes to incestuous feelings.

Saleem's “self” as the masculine and the patriarch in a patriarchal social order fails to retain itself before the “otherness” and femininity of Jamila. A male, and hence belonging to the dominant section of a patriarchal society, is not “free” to act in accordance with his whims and desires, like a master, but has to adhere to a power, superior to his masculinity as well as the social patriarchy. Far from being the “self” and the powerful, at the end of the novel, a blushing Saleem, attempts resisting the advances of Padma, at the pickle factory. In addition, Aadam, rather than prevailing over the “perforated sheet”, becomes a victim of it and falls in love with parts of Naseem's body. The “sheet” that was veiling Naseem is a traditional symbol of female chastity and her secondary status in feminism. Aadam, however, toes the “sheet”, becoming a slave to it, thereby ensuring that the plans of blind Ghani are fruitful. The words “Blushing, resisting the advances and pickle” are conventionally

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employed for the feminine, and hence the female, in a typical social construct, but Saleem, a male, being attributed with feminine terms, in relation to a female mark a major discrepancy in the traditional understanding of gender and power in a society. His character gets governed by some forces bigger than the masculinity of the male and the femininity of the female. The simplified principle of a hierarchy where the male is superior to the female does not negotiate the ‘discrepancies’ in *Midnight’s Children*. Consequently, the entire construct of the traditional principle of power needs to be re-assessed to accommodate these ‘discrepancies’.

This ‘usurpation’ of “selfhood” of man by a superior “self” is evident in two American plays, *The Hairy Ape* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Products of the Modern era, the former is a composition of Eugene O’Neill, published in 1922, the latter, published in 1947, is by Tennessee Williams. *The Hairy Ape* represents an order where power rests with the Upper Class that dominates the lower class and hence, Yank, in spite of his “apish” power, fails to avenge himself on the Upper Class. However, what is ‘strange’ is that Mildred Douglas, in spite of her “selfhood”, is not the master of the social order. Desperate to claim a space for herself in the Social Order, but in vain, she says:

“I’m a waste product in the Bessemer process—like the millions. Or rather, I inherit the acquired trait of the by-product, wealth, but none of the energy, none of the strength of the steel that made it. I am sired by gold and darned by it, as they say at the race track—damned in more ways than one...”
(<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4015/4015-h/4015-h.htm>)

Her desperation, to merely “belong” in this social order, let alone be its master, and the fiasco that it leads to, is evident when she says:

Please do not mock at my attempts to discover how the other half lives. Give me credit for some sort of groping sincerity in that at least. I would like to help them. I would like to be some use in the world. Is it my fault I don't know how? I would like to be sincere, to touch life somewhere. [*With weary bitterness.*] But I'm afraid I have neither the vitality nor integrity. All that was burnt out in our stock before I was born.” (ibid)

A Streetcar Named Desire, composed almost 25 years after *The Hairy Ape*, is witness to a changed social order, where the proletariat “took over” as the dominant section, reducing the upper class to “bastardization”. In this new social order,

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Stanley Kowalski, a worker, can successfully “bring down” two upper class women, in Stella and Blanche. Stanley, the new ‘master’ of a new social order, says:

When we first met, me and you, you thought I was common. How right you was, baby. I was common as dirt. You showed me the snapshot of the place with the columns. I pulled you down off them columns. (121)

Stanley is a socially ‘superior’ Yank, attaining what Yank could not. The “otherness” of Yank has changed to the “selfhood” of Stanley and yet, he too, much like Mildred Douglas, is a product of a power greater than himself. This power expresses itself when Mitch, a friend and peer of Stanley, shows a soft corner for Blanche and is immediately relegated as ‘unworthy’ and unmasculine. His character highlights the options men like Stanley have while playing the master: minimal. They lack a choice of being different, thereby becoming the “other” to something bigger: the Social Order.

This shift is paradigmatic as it marks a deviation of “self-other” from individuals to social order-individual. It marks the dawn of an epoch in which the individual, masculine or feminine, is secondary in and to his own social world. T. S. Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, foregrounds

this new social hierarchal arrangement, juxtaposing it to the ancient world of individual’s “self” being in contrast to the “otherness” of the social order. Eliot presents the Waste lands of antiquity, social orders, produced of the actions of individuals like the Fisher King and Oedipus; standing in juxtaposition to the modern waste land marked by a civilization’s failure without any individual central to the fiasco.

The Social Order, as the new masculine relegates the individual to a secondary position rendering him optionless and choiceless, leaving merely one route: to follow its dictates, even if untenable and irreconcilable. This new ominous and omniscient facet of the Social Order is elucidated in another American play, *All my Sons*. Though Miller’s emphasis in the play revolves around the idea of individuals owning social responsibility, it also reflects, through the character of Joe Keller, the absolute strength of the Social Order, donning the mantle of the supreme “self”, “othering” everything and everyone else coming in the way. Joe opts for his family, over social responsibility and dispatches the defective cylinder heads and puts the blame on Steve. The society accepts him, in spite of clear knowledge of him “pulling a fast one on Steve”. Joe’s conviction at having made the right choice is reinforced as he says:

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Nothin's bigger than that. And you're going to tell him, you understand? I'm his father and he's my son, and if there's something bigger than that I'll put a bullet in my head! (64)

The arrival of his son, however, brings him face to face with the other side of the social construct: Social Responsibility; and suddenly, the society labels Joe as selfish. Chris says:

For me! Where do you live, where have you come from? For me! ...I was dying every day and you were killing my boys and you did it for me? What the hell do you think I was thinking of, the Goddam business? (60)

Joe becomes a helpless victim of social constructs that are, at best, nebulous. Moreover, Joe never had the option of choosing otherwise, and hence, even if he goes back in time, cannot change his decision, lest his family is ruined that many years earlier. In the light of the above irreconcilable contradictions, Joe, either needs to live, unquestioningly bowing before the social constructs, where in spite of being guilty, he is accepted, or, being a man of principles, one with traits of an individual, kill himself.

The social forces that work in tandem to generate a set of social norms, superseding the individual are explicated in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. It projects four such factors: Family, Religion, Nationalism and Education. Stephen, having passed through an inept educational system, a disoriented family, an insufficient religion and a mere façade of nationalism, in University College, Dublin, says:

When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.

Consequently, gendered order in a society draws a magnitude greater than the femininity of the female and the masculinity of the male. Rather, there is a two-tier structure of power: male-female and individual-social order. While it cannot be negated that the social order is patriarchal in nature, where the female is subdued to the male; yet, the individual-social order power structure becomes the defining and causal principle working behind the structure of patriarchy.

Consequently, in terms of masculine-feminine, the male-female dichotomy is superseded by the individual-social order binary and hence, even in a

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patriarchal social order, the male merely is an “Oppressed Oppressor”, and hence is, at the core, feminine. It is mandated for him to be dominant and aggressive in the social order, much like a female is mandated to be submissive, and hence ‘inferior’ to the male. The statement seems contradictory, much like a masculine female, but a feminine male is a man’s actual position in the social order. This notion is reflective of the fact that, just like women are not born but made; men too are not born but made. Stephen M. Whitehead opines:

These processes are never fixed and never settled. They are under constant revision, negotiation and movement; in which case the idea that a core masculinity lies deep in men's inner biological state, to be rendered unto the social through men's natural propensities, is just not tenable (5).

Putting the entire construct in different words, Modern World is the product of an order where the Creation supersedes the Creator. The Social Order and its pillars are, eventually, creations of its citizens. Spatial sojourns lead to disparate Social Orders and the manifestations of their constructs, but one thing stays persistent: the “otherness” of the male as well as the female. The “otherness” is so innate that all power relations fall

under the grand canopy of this absolute masculinity of the Social Order.

This shift of the masculine-feminine from male-female; haves-have nots; etc. to Social order-individual respectively, heralds the dawn of an era where the individual, who came to the centre with Renaissance, ceases to be significant, having being forced to accede the centre-stage to an era of individual insignificance, the Modern Era. Modern Literature, consequently, is plush with tragedies and complications that this Modern Age brought in its train.

The Gender conflict, then in the Modern Gendered Age, annulling the traditional conflict, has to be assessed in this new light and paradigm, hitherto unknown. The composition of the masculine and feminine is altered irretrievably in the wake of this new Power Principle. This new and potent impersonal Social Order, through its multifarious institutions, constructs a norm, that ultimately, like any power wielder, make it the masculine. However, much like most ruthless monarchs, this Social Order hides its “selfhood” behind the absolutely distinct façade: masculinity of patriarchy. Consequently, much unbecoming the faceless veil, the ‘veil’ of the social order has a face: of men as the oppressors against the feminine and the powerless females. The façade, then, also diverts the entire focus from the real and primary cause to

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one of its subservient institutions. The Social Order, then, emerges as the transcendental “self” and the situation is aptly summed up by Arnold in “Dover Beach”:

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and
flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night.
Interrogation of this transcendentalism and a subsequent re-alignment of the gendered order, then, assume enormous significance at two levels: First, from a Social order-individual gendered order, the Social order has to be hauled out, thereby placing the individual at the helm of affairs in a society; and secondly, the very structure of the order, a gendered one, has to be interrogated and demolished, because its pestering presence generates an order of oppression and inequality, paving way for exploitation and inhuman treatment of the “other”. It is imperative to understand that unless the transcendental and absolute masculinity of the social order is not challenged and compromised, there lies little hope for decimation of the gendered order. For unless the power is ‘usurped’ from the order, back into individual hands, the order shall resist change, violently, if it so demands. Once this power is taken from the social order, the individual can attempt at thwarting the re-establishment of a gendered order and resist against it.

The individual as the centre of social affairs, consequently, assumes significance. Literature has strove to play its role in this re-establishing, leading to an order that is “individual centric”. Stephen Dedalus’s metamorphosis, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, to an artist capable of offering his theory of “Applied Aquinas”, evading, in the process, the “nets” of traditional fidelity, comprising religion, education, family and nationalism, flung at the likes of him, is one such attempt. However, the ending of the novel also highlights the risks with which the path is fraught: loneliness and uncertainty of success. This is why Dedalus, at the end, ends up with a prayer, hoping for success: “Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead.”

In *Kitne Pakistan*, Kamleshwar offers a solution through the mythical Gilgamesh, who was willing to challenge and defeat death to rescue his friend Enkidu and in the process defy the omnipotent and absolute power in the world: Gods. Gilgamesh says:

"...manushya matr ke liye mrityu ko
parajit karunga! Main mrityu se
mukti ki aushadhi khoj kar laaunga"
(34).

Friendship, symbolizing a larger concept of looking out for each other, at all costs and against all odds, is one factor that

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can seize power from the transcendental wielders of power, that Kamleshwar, in *Kitne Pakistan* constructs as “Pakistan”: a symbolic reference to a modern world that is divided through boundaries of religion, nationality, etc. The finest manifestation of friendship is exemplified in Devi Tanya, the Mesopotamian Goddess, aspiring for a union with man, to counter the unquestionable “selfhood” of God. The reference becomes symbolic of a much-desired yet elusive unity in contemporeity: a unity of individuals against a system that is governing their lives.

The factor that can make such a unity tenable and long-lasting is Love and the significance of the emotion is summed up in “Dover Beach”:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another!

Marhi da Diwa by Gurdial Singh reflects the possibilities that love generates for a life dominated by social institutions. Jagseer’s relationship with Bhani, and the dignity, bordering on sublime and heroic, corresponding to the dignity with which they sustain their relationship in an intensely traditional and orthodox social order makes them heroic in the traditional sense of the word, a quality of an individual.

Two factors, that stand common, in friendship and love, are belongingness and

sacrifice. While “belongingness” is the ability to be called as one of the own, it also stands as the major unsurpassable obstacle before the Modern Man. As a dying Yank, in *The Hairy Ape*, says, “. He got me, aw right. I’m trou. Even him didn’t tink I belonged. [Then, with sudden passionate despair.] Christ, where do I get off at? Where do I fit in?” This sense of belongingness is lost on the modern man as he finds himself as the persistent “other”. Sacrifice, on the other hand, is the ability to consume oneself, for greater good, much like Jerry does in *The Zoo Story* when he impales himself on the knife in order to bring about some change in the impersonal order of things. While the correctness of Jerry’s action is a matter of independent discussion, the intention and the magnitude of Jerry’s action cannot be belittled. It is this conscience and consciousness of the individual that makes possible for him, in the midst of an inhuman and all-pervading, omnipotent and transcendental masculine, harbour hope for the reinstatement of the individual at the centre. Kamleshwar highlights it when he says, in *Kitne Pakistan*:

...Main bhrasht ho gaye devtaon ke
lok ki dastak hoon. Main insaan ke
liye pyar dosti, shanti aur kranti ke
moolya aur samrat Gilgamesh ki
awaaz lekar aayi hoon...maine us
samay is awaaz ko apni nahbi mein
chupa liya tha, jab samast

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*sabhyataon ke devta ise bandi
banana chahate the...manushya ki
yeh sabse badi dharohar hai...yeh
bailos, bekhauf awaaz! Yahi main
aapko saumpne aayi hoon. (Kitne
Pakistan, 44)*

Relying on and persisting stubbornly to the principles of friendship and love, both in the literal and symbolic

senses, utilizing the tool of literature and its “Voice”, shall definitively and conclusively blunt the double edged social order pervading modern life, reinstating the individual where:

She can, though every face should scowl
And every windy quarter howl
Or every bellows burst, be happy still (“A
Prayer for my Daughter”)

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