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A Marxist Feminist Analysis of Nafisa Rizvi's *The Blue Room*

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Abstract

The life of women in a conservative capitalist society is always pitiful. They face various hardships to survival in a male dominated society. *The Blue Room* by Nafisa Rizvi vividly portrays the situation of women in patriarchal societies. Zaib and her aunt Zainab are consistently exploited by the male heads of their families. They never resist fulfilling their fixed gender roles. This research aims at finding out how women face and resist these situations in a lower class and bourgeoisie family through a Marxist feminist interpretation of the novel at hand. The results of the study conclude that women are considered inferior to men in Pakistani conservative societies. The situation could be made better only if women could get proper education and empowerment.

Introduction

Gender discrimination has been affecting the lives of women which is clear from the fact that how the community perceives them. They are considered as commodities and dependent beings who are always in a situation of identity crisis unless they find a male partner for themselves who becomes their identity. They are deprived of their rights, consistently being neglected, and forced to suppress self-expression. (Ali et al., 2022). Living a life where they are deprived of their legal rights, domestic rights, and other social and political rights, women throughout the world face sufferings and violence in all the male-dominant societies. However, this patriarchal nature has long been seen in the female heads of Pakistani families too. These matriarchs are not too much different from those patriarchs who suppress younger female members of their families restricting them from their due rights. In fact, the law should have protected women to ensure their equal rights (Tong, 2009).

Feminism appeared as a reaction to the violence and oppression women face in patriarchal and matriarchal societies. This movement has so far appeared in three phases. Its first phase addressed the basic legal rights of women like their right to vote and their involvement in other political affairs. The second phase was concerned with the deconstruction of stereotypes as it exposed the imaginative exploitation of women by authors. Its third phase addressed the inclusion of women for standing against the voice of westernization of feminism. (Maqbool et al., 2022)

Marxist feminism has its roots from Marxism which is concerned with organizing society in a classless fashion. Marxist feminism deals with how women themselves are classed inside their families, outside in their societies, or at international level. This theory explains the theoretical frameworks that have emerged from the amalgamation of both Marxism and Feminism. Marxist feminists believe that women cannot get their due rights living under capitalism. (Tong, 2009)

The treatment women get from men in Pakistan is highly condemnable. They are continuously objectified throughout their lives and are forced to live under the will of men (Ansari, 2019). Women are also objectified on many occasions like resolving the disputes of a male-dominated family. They are treated as a commodity sold in a market. Even their beauty and talents are used to sell for hefty amounts (Hongdae et al., 2018).

The Blue Room (2009) is set in Dera Murshid, Jahangir Abad, Karachi Pakistan. Zaib-un-Nisa is the protagonist of the novel. She is an insightful little girl who has more qualities than the other girls in her family. She befriends the four walls of a room in her house Shahi Manzil. So many tragic events change the lifestyle of this little girl and take her away from her four walls which become her bosom friends. Zaib is a far sighted girl who knows the real face of Maulvi. The maulvi is one of the antagonists in the story. He works for the family which becomes Zaib's in-laws later in the story. The story is set against the backdrop of a feudal tradition, replete with the grandeur of its havelis and the myths that live within them.

Research Objectives

1. To identify how people have fixed gender roles in Pakistani societies as presented in Rizvi's *The Blue Room*.
2. To explore the sufferings of women living under a capitalist system in a patriarchal society in the novel under study.

Research Questions

1. How do women constantly suffer from fixed gender roles and societal inequalities in *The Blue Room*?
2. How does a capitalist system deprive women of their social, economic, and domestic rights in *The Blue Room*?

Literature Review

Marxist and Socialist Feminists claim that social existence determines the consciousness. For them, the observation that "Women's work is never done" is more than an aphorism; it is a description of the nature of the woman's work. Always on call, women form a conception of themselves they would not have if their roles in the 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 to understand the unique character of women's oppression (Tong, 2009).

This research aims at Marxist-Feminist analysis of the novel *The Blue Room*. No previous research could be found on the said topic, however, an interview with the author by Hafiz Siddiqui was read to find any relevant data on the topic. In her interview she is asked about the birth of her major character Zaib's birth in her writing moments. To this question she says that Zaib was born of her unfulfilled needs, her aspirations, and internal angsts but as she grew, she escaped from her grasp and decided to live life by her rules and not Rizvi's. Siddiqui replied that there was a conflict in Zaib when she was doing what she knew to be wrong but did that any way to spite herself and the author. (Siddiqui, 2023)

In the same interview Nafisa Rizvi is asked if she wants to convey that change is inevitable for Feudal families in Pakistan and that how fast are things really changing there. She says that things are not changing unfortunately. She says that usually children bring a sense of modernity to society. She says she believes that feudalism has seen its day and will fall but there is resistance to it. In her interview she said to Siddiqui that Shifting trends with double income families, women's education, and empowerment were making those changes possible. She claimed that although she was painting a rosy picture. She requested the interviewer to desist from believing her and understand that in many areas they were regressing instead of progressing. (Siddiqui, 2023)

It is quite clear from the author's point of view that women seriously want to live the life of their choice. Even in a work of fiction, a woman gets escaped from the author's grasp to live a life of her own choice. All this is a reason of their suppression by men in the male-dominated society of Pakistan. According to the author, the prevailing situation could be faced with educating and empowering women like men.

The application of Marxist theory in literature is not new. Several researchers have studied literary works from social theories. One such study is conducted by Shamas and Ehsan (2020). They found that regardless of their quality education and other societal rights, women still stand on the verge of the doors of cruelty, injustice, malice, forced marriages, sexual violence, and hatred by men.

Abbasi (2015) in his research work, *Marxist Feminism in Alice Walker's Novels: The Temple of my Familiar, Meridian, and The Color Purple* states that women are economically oppressed and that it has led to their subordination to men. He concluded that this phenomenon could be overcome by their emancipation through educating them to stand for their rights against men in a patriarchal society.

Pratama (2018) in his study, *Analysis of Marxist Feminism on the Oppressed Women as Breeding Apparatus in The Handmaid's Tale Novel* concluded that the gender and social classes in a society causes dystopian life. According to the study, women are classified into various groups depending upon their role in the society.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Classical Marxists feminists work within the boundaries appointed by Marx, Engels, Lenin, and other thinkers of the Nineteenth century. According to these thinkers, classism instead of sexism is the root cause of women's oppression. The belief of the Socialist feminists is different from these classical feminists. They think that classism is not the only worst enemy of women those results in their oppressed state. Socialist feminists tried to identify women's inferiority in a coherent and systematic way that integrates class, sex, and other aspects of identity like race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. (Tong, 2009)

According to Engels (as cited by Tong, 2009), class consciousness is exactly opposite to false consciousness wherein individuals can have a true sense of class unity This research work identifies the false consciousness found in the major characters of Rizvi's novel, *The Blue Room*.

According to Hegel and Feuerbach (2004), alienation is merely a phenomenon related to the mind of the people, but Karl Marx thinks differently. He believes that it is related to material and social processes. In his theory of alienation, Marx describes alienation as a separation of the things or beings that are normally united together. Marx's (as cited by Shah, 2015) theory of alienation also discusses the antagonism of certain things or beings that become the cause of this phenomenon This work aims at finding how women are alienated in a male-dominated society living under a capitalist system.

Objectification according to Marx is the way through which people own the system of the natural order in the world. Some people own things or beings in this process. This process is carried out by human activities through their lives. If certain conditions are provided, then this is natural in a capitalist society. (Ritzer, p.54)

Marx did not specifically mention the oppression of women although his works are a source of theoretical insights which are necessary to meet with the idea of oppression of women living under a capitalist system. Any thought of women's oppression highlights in the mind a phenomenon where women are psychologically, socially, economically, and politically affected. (Gimenez, 2005)

The research study is purely qualitative. Through textual analysis, the researcher observed the issues faced by women in the novel under study. Data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The text of the novel is the primary source. The researcher has also read various articles as a secondary source of information.

Discussion and Analysis

The Blue Room by Pakistani author Nafisa Rizvi is a psychological narrative employing both Realism and Magic Realism for the purpose of the portrayal of various familial issues faced by the Pakistani women. This novel is set against the backdrop of a feudal tradition, replete with the grandeur of its havelis, and the myth that lives within them. Zaibunnisa is one of the major characters in the novel and in fact the protagonist of this novel. She faces difficulties throughout her life with some of these difficulties being avoided while she courageously faces some. A Marxist-Feminist and Socialist-Feminist analysis of the novel resulted in finding some points where women face several issues either they belong to the bourgeois or the lower class of a society. The results are based on the analysis of the novel with reference to women of Pakistani society.

False Consciousness of Women

According to Marxist-Feminist Theory, power lies in the hands of those who own the sources of production. The production of female in a Pakistani society could be her household works that they do at others' houses after getting married. Engels calls the phenomenon of girls getting married to boys and being owned by them "A Historical Defeat of the Female Sex." (Tong, 2009, p. 105) According to Engels, girls lose the ownership of their faculties when they get married to boys. They live and serve in a place they really do not own. He calls it the 'false consciousness of women' that they think they are the owners or co-owners of what their husbands own. In this novel, Zaibunnisa gets married to Murtaza Ameer purely at the choice of her parents. She thinks she owns what is owned by her husband Murtaza. In fact, Murtaza himself does not own anything in his house. He is compelled to leave his home and goes to meet his wife at his in-laws where she feels shocked to hear her husband saying "Something I should have done a long time ago. I have left my house. Your things have been sent to my cousin Shera's house in Safadabad and they will stay there in safe keeping until we have decided what to do." (Rizvi, 2009, p.244)

Women need class consciousness instead of their false consciousness. Only then they would be able to bring about class unity among themselves to modify the old traditional values of patriarchy. (Tong, 2009)

Alienation of Women

According to Marxist Theory of Alienation, one can be alienated from the process of production, from the product itself, from oneself, and/or from others or co-workers. Marx believes that this alienation is always a result of living in a capitalist society where all the means of production are owned by the upper class, hence, the lower class is constantly being exploited by them. (Tong, 2009)

Inside a family, the capitalist system may be the restriction of choices which do not allow the female members of a house to have freedom of choice. Thus, the female members in such a house find themselves alienated from their production, from themselves, and from the male members of their families. In *The Blue Room*, Zainab, who is Zaib's paternal aunt gets married to Shah Baqar whom she never liked to marry but only out of the compulsion that her family imposed upon her. Shah Baqar is a lustful person who never makes Zainab his priority. Even when once he comes back home after a few days, he finds that his wife has given birth to his son Ayaz and that he suffers from a high fever. He thinks that it is all the fault of Zainab and thus gives a scornful speech which eventually leads to the expulsion of Zainab from his house permanently.

“She could see the muscles twitching in his face with anger. He spoke to her in a slur and ordered her ominously, ‘Shut the child up before I put an end to his wailing myself’.” (Rizvi, 2009, p.40).

In this case, Zainab feels that she is being treated like a commodity in the market which is thrown away after it has been used up. She finds herself alienated from herself because she never thinks of her own health or her choice in any matter but always wants to remain modest and dutiful to her husband. She is alienated from her productivity because she serves the house, not because she likes to serve others but being owned by her husband it is her duty to serve all the people of the house.

“It was as if her body had been broken but her spirit had transformed into something new, something strong and pulsating and ready for the world. She knew then that she was destined to live a life unlike other women.” (Rizvi, 2009 p.43-44).

Objectification of Women

Marxist-Feminists and Socialist-Feminists aim to create a world in which women may experience themselves as whole persons rather than fragmented beings.(Tong, 2009). Zaibunnisa lives a life which is full of difficulties. She never feels complete either at her father's house or at her husband's. She has more responsibilities than she should have liked tackling some important matters of her family at the time she did not have married, maintaining the delicate balance of care between her husband and her other in-laws, and deciding about her future life at Qasr-e-Zaib. At the blue room in her father's house, she replies the four walls:

“You make it sound like I'm supposed to be the savior of every misbegotten person on the face of the earth.” (Rizvi, 2009, p.202).

The four walls talk to her to convince her about her gender role and her confession to be objectified by saying.

Look back at the times in your life when you have helped some members of the family, directly or otherwise..... You rescued your father from the throes of death. You repaid the debt your family owed Sheikh Akbar Ameer's family by marrying Murtaza. Most of all, you have saved Murtaza from a life of complete desolation and despair. And you have given both Ayesha and Mumtaz a reason to wake up in the morning and get on with their lives even though they may not have expressed it openly to you. (Rizvi, 2009, p.203).

Rizvi has portrayed her character as if she could not find wholeness in herself throughout the story. She is exhibited like an object owned by others; first by her parents and grandparents, then by her in-laws, and eventually by Murtaza. This is a quite common issue in Pakistani families where women are constantly objectified first at their parents' house and then at their in-laws.

Economic Oppression of Women

To be economically independent, women need to be well-educated. Only the educated women can earn their lives independently, otherwise, men would always dominate them. (Umar, 2018). When the male head of a family dies or leaves his family, then the women become the only hope for her children. In this case, they can face many kinds of oppression from men. These women are so much restricted to their houses that even they and their children die of hunger they would not work outdoors, otherwise they would have the lowest moral and social status in the society. Salar, who is a young boy in the novel *The Blue Room* listens to Maulvi Jalal at a *Deeni Majlis*, where the Maulvi was cursing the women who work and help their children survive.

The wrath of God is upon all fornicators and His anger is scorching for all women who enjoy the pleasures of the flesh. Let not each woman forget that her work is procreation and nothing but, and subservience to her husband's needs and the needs of her children is her fulfilment. She must remain within the sanctity of her home and not expose herself to the eyes of strange men. (Rizvi, 2009, p.53).

It seemed very strange to everyone however, Salar rose at the point of women's restriction to their homes saying: "My mother works in a garment factory to support the four of us as our father has abandoned us. She is not a harlot nor a heretic." (Rizvi, 2009, p.53).

Upon this resistance by Salar against the Maulvi's stance, he is insulted in a bad manner by the Maulvi. "I can see what the absence of a father has done to you." (Rizvi, 2009, p.53).

Salar's mother sends her son to Maulvi for an apology. The Maulvi tells the woman that her child needs to be morally educated. Thus, Salar's mother faces the consequences of the incident solely by herself in the shape of losing both her son and her reputation. All this happens just because women are considered dominated by men in a patriarchal society. Their work either at offices or at any other place outside their houses is considered very immoral, depriving them from getting emancipated economically.

Conclusion

Rizvi's *The Blue Room* is a depiction of the state of women in the patriarchal Pakistani society. It shows how power and capitalism in familial relations exploit the women and their capabilities. Zaib is a perfect example of a woman who has more qualities than all the male members of her house but due to the patriarchal restrictions she is exploited. Zainab is the symbolic representation of the household wives who have fixed gender roles in Pakistani societies. This study situates Marxist-Feminism and Socialist-Feminism as the critical reading approach to understand women's oppression and inequality and proposes an unclassed future for women's empowerment and their emancipation. The researcher found that women constantly suffer from their fixed role in a patriarchal society. They are bound to be modest and dutiful to their husbands or other male members of their family. According to the findings of this work, practical solution to this problem is what Engels calls "Economic Independence." Lack of opportunities for women to earn their lives independently leads them to live as subordinates to the male members of their families. This research study also found that women are kept at a far distance from their due rights. They are deprived from taking important decisions about their lives.

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