

8

Gender and Margins: Reading the Peripheries in Mayank Austen Soofi's *Nobody Can Love You More*

Suparna Roy

Independent Researcher, India

Abstract

The concept of caste-identity-gender is a trio analogy of marginalisation. The hard effort of the society to continue to maintain the established 'center' and 'periphery' heredity is assisted by the above trio! Identity has always highlighted the fact and subject of the 'I', this 'i' which when is analysed under the spectrum of marginalisation, seems to be subjugated or in power about the caste and gender. Spaces, created for the existence of any being results in the formation of a cluster of ethical epistemologies, which can be very much centered and specific to that particular organisation of bodies/beings. Gender is a complex operative device for the power to organize and categorize identities, and to veil up the continuum nature of its existence; while, caste is that dynamics of operation within the Brahminical setup of Indian society that stands as the core theorem of suppression for any 'body'. My paper would, therefore, like to examine the peripheries of women as subjective objects in *Nobody Can Love You More*.

Keywords: identity, caste, gender, culture, bodies

Introduction

Multiculturalism has not only brought into speculation the lives that are trodden within interrogations of 'pure/impure' binary but have nevertheless offered with the lens to perceive them to deconstruct the patriarchal cultural setting. It provides the 'power', the right to 'dehumanize' one's existence and mould in to benefit the few recognised shelters of identities. Within the broader spectrum 'marginalisation' is a welcoming device to mark and segregate in a

convenient pattern to operate. The freedom of any soul begins from the mind, for few 'bodies' in our society this mind is universally fitted, established, and owned, whereas for the 'others' scuffles are created to reclaim the existence of their 'own mind'. Swati Shinde in an article titled "Voices and Views from the Margins" published in the newspaper – *Times of India* presented how the lives of marginalised people are, and within this spectrum of layered oppression how the flowing popular culture always veils the lives of those identities and bodies who are restricted within and up to the peripheries of social and political re-presentation. The throbbing sense of *othering* has created a web of displayed 'bodies' which our cognitive standard accepts as the 'other' and continues to maintain that intricate design if 'othering' so that the centre can endlessly benefit. This set of ideas churned from the popular practice of few celebrated norms and suppression of the rest, where binarised ontological (existence of a being) representations function vibrantly, over years of uninterrogated praxis that leads to the understanding of "natural/naturality", which is very similar to what Nivedita Menon wrote in her book *Seeing Like A Feminist* (2012) – "The whole point of nude make-up is to spend hours painting your face to make it look like you had not touched it at all. The maintaining of 'social order' is rather like that... Complex networks of cultural reproduction are dedicated to this purpose solely" (Menon, vii). The problem lies in this conditioned acceptance without any interrogation, something that can be relatable to what took place hundreds of years ago. To find a solution one needs to consider and recognize the problem, without which no solutions can ever be presented. The issues of marginalisation on peripheral identities are never recognised as an issue to be dealt with like years ago when the British ruled us. Referring to the same, in the essay written by Patankar and Omvedt, we see they emphasised through their article "*The Dalit Liberation Movement in Colonial Period*" (1979), how the matter of Dalit lives has been dismantled-

Our wrongs have remained open and they have not been righted. Although 150 years of British rule have ruled away. Of what good is such a government to anybody? It was a government which did realize that the capitalists were denying the workers a living wage and decent condition of works and which did realize that the landlords were

squeezing the masses dry and yet it did not remove social evils that blighted lives of the downtrodden class these years. (413)

Theoretical Interpretations

Mayank Austen Soofi's *Nobody Can Love You More* is a book based on portraying the Red light district of Delhi. This book has tried to depict a little bit of what can be slightly true about the lives of these women who within themselves have formed a separate world of 'their own'. Some forced, some trafficked, some tricked, and some sold; some voluntary choices, are few selected instances that carefully threads this book. Soofi through a series of open-ended questions and interviews has tried portraying the lives of these 'untold unmentioned and exploited women'. Soofi also tried showcasing the ins and outs of their business- the business of their bodies, their daily lives, and work, how capitalism and sex have demandingly survived on the bodies of Women for years. Soofi tried to appreciate and approach, celebrate and present them as people, who are one among us, and tried reaching out for those simple voices of pain.

Theories and interpretations have often participated in accordance to decode numerous layers of perceptions. Eventually, theories have played a crucial role to organize and provide rhythms to the researching plates of networking ideas. Realizing the stratified marginalisation system of which the Indian culture is a vivid example, a clear depiction of the same can also be found in Indian literary works. Theories and literature have always functioned in a manner, that interpretations have become more layered and complexly interesting with portrayal of the cultural hypocritic standards within a society. Culture as a huge section and branch of power is enormously a tool to subjugate the rule and an excuse to continue the same. It's cultural hegemony and extension that keeps on associating and amassing oppressive rules of 'power'. Literatures and literary theories have eventually started reflecting the pains and hues of the subjugated voices, and narrates these tales to present how their re-presentation is wrong and misleading when the power of the pen is with a body that is very much privileged. Cultural reflection on literary spheres have resonated the cramped hands of patriarchal supremacy with Indian socio-economic domain. The literary texts selected here reflects the lives of women but from an 'intersectional

cultural perspective', where insulting a woman with lewd comments and touches seems acceptable as they are 'sellers of bodies and pleasure' whereas, the same thing on another body is 'unacceptable' because they do not sell it, yet cannot even protest.

Prostitution and Literature

Prostitution is a cult and a culture of its own. Patriarchy has constructed the profession within that marginalised periphery from where the voices have always been nullified. Why is prostitution exempted from the mainstream discussion; if we delve a bit deeper, we can also understand that prostitution has created a space for the bodies although in an exploitive zone. Within this zone the autonomy of an anatomy is pictured with glamour(ed) tales of pain. But if there was no demand for such bodies, no trafficking of such bodies would have taken place. In the world economy Prostitution accounts for a huge portion of business that continues to run unnoticed and legally supported. Desire is channelised into this 'unmentionable zone' of Prostitution repeatedly each and every night where the flesh is melted with raw paws and frustration. We are able to narrate many different tales about popular prostitutes or red-light areas of India, because the narrative power re-presents the stories and bodies that are underrepresented within this phallogocentric community. Creation of prostitution as peripheral bruises has been a result of terrible practices over days and years; careful maintenance of rules of which kinds of vaginas are to be kept behind the veils and doors, which to be thrown outside to be stamped. This evaluating form includes class, caste, religion, gender, sexuality, and many more nets to assess whom to place where. But the more critical question is who does this, from where do they get the power to do this? This is nothing other than a small community or space or spot that eventually grows and spreads its branches to become the 'global ethico-onto-epistemological space', which perhaps omits and restricts the layers, experiences, intersectional occurrences, individuality, isolation, personal spaces, etcetera, to ambitiously get recognised as the authentic authority of a specific anatomical power- a phallogocentric society; hence, from epistemology to ontology, everything becomes phallus-oriented. Therefore, within this phallus-oriented community we get to explore layers of faithful services provided by people who are conditioned enough to disgust the

identities with norms other than the Brahmin-white-heterosexual-man. Prostitution by this community has been excluded in all formats, while night celebrations with them have been accepted with silent jests among such men.

In Soofi's work, a different flavour, aroma, and culture are portrayed. I am beginning like this because our society has framed and reframed the 'world where sex is just a work and profession (by choice or not)' as a separate 'universe' of its own, where the 'people from "respected" families are not expected to tread or even let their eyes visit those thresholds'. Prostitution is a profession where the alliteration of emphasizing its urgency to be recognised under the legal professional works is somewhat overturned and overlooked by our 'benevolent patriarchal' society. The concept of women's body and their identity is linked and understood as something essentially inseparable. The idea of body for women is as Judith Butler says, "Women are the sex which is not "one". Within...a phallogocentric language, women constitute the *unrepresentable*...women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity" (Butler, 13). This separate world of sex-workers is to be kept and operated in 'silence', during the nights, behind the veils, under the 'red and colourful lights' only! The lives of these people seem to be as much 'storied' as their shelters are. Every story of their existence and identity, every escape, each domination, every 'rape tale', each smile, each 'shared bed', all those alternative names and hidden earnings, have created 'sex workers' identity to be something that needs speculation and discussion, not silences. Soofi has beautifully portrayed the lives of these people in an autobiographical format to the readers but has also confessed that the effort to portray anything is a 'lie', a lie which will remain a lie only, no matter what it says, it will only re-present those lives with an attempt to justify their existence but can never represent and can never be the 'truth tale' for the same-

There's a lot of things that you must have discovered about the women's lives upstairs- how they came here and so on- but you will skip some aspects and highlight others. And this manipulation will shape the image you present to your readers. You have the pen, you have the power...but it will never be an accurate portray of your subject (Soofi, 195).

Soofi may not have clearly demonstrated the plight of Dalit prostitutes, as he writes and explains how religion, caste, believes all merges into the same place for the sex-workers. However, if we place the customer's point of view who if enquires about the background, and the pays; marginalisation takes numerous layers. Within this already marginalised space of prostitution, a Dalit worker is more easily considered available, as we see- "You said you will give hundred rupees...you deserve this" (Soofi, 105). Soofi has simply presented another identity whose journey is designated to the peripheral margins. The denizens who lived in the 'Kotha No.300' of GB Road, Delhi cooked foods for their children and lovers just like any other ordinary women from any respected household would do, visited temples, celebrated festivals, listened to film songs and engage themselves in entertainment of various forms of which they have the accessibility. Soofi presented how they led lives just like we all do, just like a 'civilised' world did- "Go to any part of the world, and you will find them. GB Road is a part of our society. How can you say that they are not civilised?" (194). Few bodies have restricted and pushed them to the marginal shelters, where their identities are equated in terms of their 'flesh-sold'! Remembering what Helene Cixous in *Laugh of Medusa* said that within the phallogocentric symbolic order of our society there are separate entries constructed for men and women; hence the 'subject position' open to them stands different. This difference results in the creation of 'crisis' which omits all experiences and intersectional sufferings of women; thereby, creating an identity that leads to 'half-voiced' and paralysed selves. These created women as an identity and body who were the victim of this phallogocentric society. The only reason for which they face such perils is the 'marking' system of our social order, where women have been tagged with 'nothing beyond oppression'; suppression because the body is a 'woman's' and hence from rape to physical abuse, this 'body' is a platform to showcase these 'cultural stigmas'. Thus, Soofi writes- "...There are burn marks on left side of her chin...She has gone home to deliver a child but the baby died. So, she is being very silent" (Soofi, 132). Thus, 'silence' is the only operative security for their 'storied stories'.

Conclusion

Woman's identity as the 'oxymoron' presentation now needs a stoppage, where every time woman must not be visualised within the structural binary of 'pure/impure', 'wife/whore', 'and angel/devil' and so on. Thus, the objectification and suppression of women from and under diversifies layers is still a question that is composed under 'silent discourse'. Within this cultural heterogeneity of India this subjugative power regime that commodifies women from birth to death and turns their lives to a living hell needs discussion urgently. Therefore, amidst various 'silent operations', identities have somewhat created and destroyed their spheres of reliance again and again, failing in their attempts to extend the lines and diameter of the 'centre'/main/image and move beyond just reflections/servitude/night body lives! Caste and gender are actually tools produced and reproduced with time to shift the horizons of 'identities' that can be excluded from recognition and rights, be it the right to live freely or to survive with dignity. So, merging the targeted object- 'identity' with the tools which modifies, categorizes, cramps, scratches it, was only an attempt among the vast network of interpretations, to depict how limited 'interaction' based on caste and gender has provided the provision of the trio- caste/gender/identity to flourish in a regressively progressive format!

Works Cited

- Beauvoir, De Simone. *The Second Sex*. Vintage, 2011.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1990.
- Cixious, Helene. *Laugh of Medusa*. Oxford, 2008.
- Patankar, Bharat and Gail Omved. "The Dalit Liberation Movement in Colonial Period." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 14, 1979, No. 7/8, pp.409-424. JSTOR<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4367359>.
- Soofi's, Mayank Austen. *Nobody Can Love You More*. Penguin, India, 2012.
- Shinde, Swati. "Voices and views from the Margin." *Times of India*. 22 February. 2009, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/pune/Voices-and-viewsfrom-the-margin/articleshow/4167483>. Accessed 22 February 2009.