

A Journey from Existential crisis to Freedom in RupaBajwa's *The Sari Shop*

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Abstract

*The subaltern existence of Ramchand with alienation and yearning to upscale the social ladder in RupaBajwa's *The Sari Shop* not only exposes the sham of the hegemony but presents the paraphernalia of corruption that binds the marginalized in its grip. The crux of the problem is the existential absurdity a sense of desolation, disorientation in the morbid socio-cultural gyre of power-politics. Ramchand's existential pangs, utter-fatalism realizing his loss of self-identity along with the brutal killing of a subaltern woman Kamala makes him fight for a third space for reclaiming identity through enunciation thereby exerting his freedom by rebelling against the bourgeoisie entrapments in a zeal to authenticate his existence, self-identity as 'in-itself'. This paper espouses the main-plot shelling the sub-plot dealing with subaltern existence, their striving towards individual positive freedom and claiming a self-identity in the third space for enunciation.*

Keywords: existentialism, subaltern, third-space, self-identity

The history of colonialism in India created a domain of politics that was heteroglossic in its idioms, irreducibly polymorphous plurality in its structure interlocking within itself most specifically the master-slave dialectic of the dominating Capitalists and the subjugating subaltern those who had contributed to the democratic demography of India. This binary social relation that create disparities make individuals the instrument and subjects the individual to the margins of the society with no access to cultural imperialism creating a space of difference and termed as marginalized. Salman Rushdie's groundbreaking novel *The Midnight's Children*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tigers* shows domination and power exertion in the discourse of subaltern. . RupaBajwa's book *The Sari Shop* exhibits the still colonized condition of the subaltern amidst the image of shining India. *The Sari Shop* Bajwa's debut novel which was long listed for the Orange Prize for fiction 2004 and hailed as India's latest literary find exposes the marginality, a deeply

rooted malaise of class conscious Indian society. Several Indian critics pointed out as recently as the 2000s that even after years of attaining political sovereignty the nation itself was still in its nascent stage.

Ranajit Guha in Subaltern Studies Group accepts the notion that nationalism fails to speak for its own people: it suppresses the politics of the subalternity. Subalternity in Ranajit Guha's term signified a dialectical and contextual relation of superordination and subordination in colonial India. The post-colonial rhetoric bearing the colonial discourse sets a trend of polarized social categories of antagonistic mentality where the subaltern subjects are unable to know their own conditions of oppression, wallow in abject poverty, can't distinguish between their desires and interests and unable to present their experiences in own authentic voice. *The SariShop* is a spirited attempt that focuses on subaltern consciousness, the existential crisis, a state of hopeless despair faced by subalterns on finding their being—something compromised, they voice protests against the modern colonial structures becoming what Spivak calls 'organic intellectual' a subaltern who breaches the intellectual fortress to give an empirical meaning to life.

The Sari Shop paradoxically reveals how the imperial mechanism at a neo-colonial set-up in the hands of the ruling elite oppresses the marginalized with the hatred that challenges the secular, democratic ideals of a nation state. It juxtaposes two unequal worlds – men with comfortable lives in unparalleled luxury and splendor the other where men dwell in extreme poverty and struggle for survival. Bajwa with great sensitivity and poignancy brings out the myriad emotions, psychological trauma and despondency that affect a subaltern life living precariously at the cross-roads that adds a socio-cultural dimension to this post-colonial writing that sensitizes specifically on subaltern alienation, pessimism caught in the throes of existential dilemma. This research paper particularly focuses on the existential crisis of the novel's protagonist Ramchand an assistant sari-seller in Sevak Sari Shop in Amritsar belonging to the proletariat of the society with a self-less surrender to the bourgeois class and a zeal to raise social status. With him we journey through the mute miseries, depression, drunken melancholy of a mechanized victim of double oppression the paranoid Kamala, who uses a counter language to voice protest against the capitalist empire in seeking identity and a space and her gruesome death. Search of one's identity amidst loss and crisis by a subaltern woman kept others inert but struck a chord in Ramchand as the both share the same fate of loss, loneliness, paralyzed existence and inarticulate desires. Ramchand deconstructs the structural monopoly with a full-throated revolt against his superiors which though did not consolidate his rank to the centre but created a radical space, a site of critical response to domination, a space acquired through years of sufferings and pain.

The novel begins with the description of the proletariat protagonist and his existential crisis. His slow-motion hours, mind fuzzy with sleep, cold morning numbness till he realized being late for his usual shop hours and verbally harassed by the mahajan. Ramchand's feeling of terrible dissatisfaction with his life, a sense of being alone and isolated created a horrible feeling – 'some gap, something missing, something that he didn't know, something that he couldn't see, something terribly important.' (Bajwa:21) This something was the reason that made him alone, feel differently with all people round him. The 'rusted iron bars', 'the dirty floor' of Ramchand's dwelling, the 'crowded bazaars', the 'aged grey concrete buildings' through which he makes his way towards the shop significantly bespeaks of the crisis of a subaltern existence 'where a very narrow alley would nudge aside the unyielding walls and squeeze itself painfully through the solid structure' (Bajwa:5). This loss is of his subaltern alienation, of poverty, of remaining trapped in a marginalized social class of lost identity caught in the flux of self-hatred. His regular evening visits at Lakhan's dhaba, the silly pranks of Hari, his pointless lifestyle, the frivolous futile evenings make him despise himself as cheap and vulgar. "What was all this madness? Where would it lead him after all?" (Bajwa:35) Ramchand's life got a sudden spark with an escape from humdrum routine was brought about by his visit to Green Avenue the rich English speaking Kapoor's household to deliver sarees for their daughter's marriage. *The Sari Shop* stresses on the marginalized psyche of Ramchand, his strong desire to come out of the mess in which their destiny has confined them. Seeing the Kapoor's conversing in the Queen's language spurred his desire to join the broken dreams of his childhood when he was sent to an English Medium school to fulfill his father's dreams and he buys himself a second hand grammar book, an Oxford Dictionary, a fresh pair of socks and a bar of lifebuoy. This he does to scrub off his subaltern identity to share a rank with the merchandise class, to come out of his pothole existence- 'shop, room, shop, room, shop, room.' (Bajwa:74) In a fresh fit of energy he cleaned his neglected room, a feeling of virtuosity with resolution took his entire Sunday pouring over the new books to rise up from the ennui and drudgery of a stupid saree-wallah, one who is worthless in the eyes of opulent Kapoors and intellectual Sachdevs. He thought that this strive in positioning himself as literate could break the timeless barrier long conflicting gap between the educated, wealthy bourgeois and the rural rustic illiterate proletarians and place him on an equal social rung with Kapoors and Bhandaris. All the ideals adored and to be adapted by Ramchand is assaulted when the bourgeoisie image-identity consciousness is exposed by a wounded woman of the lowest strata of urban proletariat.

It is with Ramchand that we journey outward into the stagnant oppressive and malicious social system, into the life of Kamala the doubly subaltern – one by the patriarchal hegemony and other in the colonial matrix. Ramchand is entrusted the task of finding the

reason of Chander, the 'loafer' in the words of Malik Mahajan's absence. Ramchand waddled through the narrow broken streets into the dirtiest locality till he came to the blocked drain filled with slimy black sludge and the house for a consolatory living. "It was more a hovel than a house. It was a ramshackle structure that looked like it could collapse at any moment." (Bajwa:105) Ramchand not only encountered the furious and drunken Chander but his wife Kamala who was disarrayed, dishevelled, weakened and broken. The occasional outbursts of couple violence, frequent resort to a drunken stupor, Kamala being foul-mouthed with face furrowed by deeper lines and eyes in cavernous hollows are evident of the existential crisis the subaltern couple had stooped into. She is indifferent of the duties of womanhood, nor does she cater to the needs of a husband and home, neither she is ritualistic like a traditional Indian woman, rather she is foul-mouthed, deviating the prescribed norms and displaying transgressive potential in violating the class construct to be demoralized 'just one of those nasty evil women-a devil in the guise of a woman' (Bajwa:120) and beaten by her husband. Kamala represents that cornered women who only enjoy the so-called liberty in the four walls of the house, satisfying the ever increasing bickering of her husband with never ending cycle of repressed desires and multiple oppression spending sleepless nights with the acute depressive syndrome.

Kamala had a happy childhood till her mother died and she was given off to Chander in marriage. She journeyed to Amritsar with her childhood reminiscences- two childhood frocks, a string of red beads, a new tube of Fair and Lovely, imported brass pin and Chinese silk scarf. Initially her life was not quite different from the one she already led performing domestic chores of a dutiful wife. 'But somewhere down the line, something had gone wrong.' (Bajwa:151) her life became pointless day by day falling into the same routine of waiting for her husband and then being beaten. Finally she became pregnant and she enjoyed the first months of pregnancy with promising hopes and maternal longings. Again the things took a wrong turn when she had a miscarriage at the third month and doctor stating briskly that she would never conceive further alarming the situation as Chander lost his job and accused Kamala "You have been very unlucky for me, Kamala. Ever since I married you, I have been having nothing but bad luck." (Bajwa:156) To Kamala's horror and disbelief Chander accused her for all the mishaps in the family cursing gods for ruining his life. These couple of incidences changed her from a dutiful wife to a cunning frustrated wife 'full of bitter poison' that would sally forth 'alcohol-laced anger' becoming a disgrace to the community. When Kamala realized that her subaltern identity has ostracized her, devastated her marriage, sickened her with coldness from a miscarriage, landed her in a subaltern existential crisis in frets and fears she was determined to protest against the insensitive world, she searched the third space of enunciation that seeks to retrieve the stifled voice of the other.

The message of Bhagavad-Gita- “Yathechhasithathakuru” is the right to do as one wish generates in Kamala a voice of protest and represents the will of weaker women “She knew whose fault it all was. She wouldn’t let them live in peace.”(Bajwa:161) .

Kamala breaks the age long silence of the subaltern and revolts at institutionalized tyranny and makes her voice consciously heard deconstructing the Spivakian approach that the subalterns cannot speak. Reference to Jean Paul Satre’s *The Wall* (Killinger:303) where a prisoner Pablo Ibbieta due for execution refuses to inform about the rebel leader Ramon Gris not in return for his release is an exemplary to Kamala undying will the inner citadel, no one can breach that remains triumphant providing personal freedom and gives her an authenticate existence She being an utter nobody grudged against the Gupta’s and Kapoor’s ‘both of them counted amongst the biggest men in Amritsar’ (Bajwa:199) and accused them for her ill-fate. She voiced out an open-aired protest “You are responsible for all this. You are responsible for our misery.” (Bajwa:167). But Kamala’s attempt to recover the voices, perspectives, and subjectivities is heavily compromised. Her crisis is intensified by the quagmire of assaults at the hands of capitalists, the policemen, the upholders of law who targeted her body to teach her a lesson by raping her in turns and beating her till she bled profusely until the white flowers on the purple sari were all stained with rust-red-blood. Next morning when she tottered back home. Chander scolded her for staying out all night without asking her the reason for it and advised her to kill herself if she had any shame left in her. Kamala is doubly ostracized as she belongs to the last ring of societal hierarchical paradigm. Bajwa adeptly picturizes the psychological desperation of Kamala who suffered gendered injustice, verging on insanity an effect of double colonization. ‘It was an isolated world, where you could feel the air thick with despair, thick with unsaid words and unshed tears. It was like travelling into darkness and reaching the heart of it.’ (Bajwa:182)

The final nail into her coffin was hammered when she hurled stone at Ravinder Kapoor. On finding to be repeatedly screwed by a woman outcaste she was beaten to death by his men. “They systematically broke her collar bone, they kicked her till two of her ribs broke. The back of her head was split open when they threw her against the wall” Not satisfied with this they paraded her in the neighbourhood with hands tied at her back finally pushing ‘her back into her home, locked the door, sprinkled the small house liberally with kerosene and set it on fire.’ (Bajwa:217) Kamala is a free autonomous being who battled against all odds with fortitude and determination for a free will and for an honoured existence for being ‘in-itself’ she tread the path of struggle that was skewed with malice, hatred, vengeance, torture. Her fight is not for equality but to be granted the basic needs and to be treated as humans. From the burnt remains Chander salvaged two frocks and a string of red glass beads wrapped carefully in a Chinese silk scarf in her trunk wondered as to why she had

kept those things with her for so long. It is this existence that the sexed other nurtured within the antagonistic society, where her dreams of a marital bliss is buried unrealized by her husband who exercised power-politics of patriarchy. Ramchand who was so long naïve and untainted, the horrid rape of Kamala and lathi charge filled him with self-hatred, of living life of a minion and aroused a rebel conscience. The ignorance of Chander regarding Kamala being raped, the harassment she underwent maintaining a precarious balance between life and death-in-life made Ramchand think of turning the table and seek justice.

“Into his heart, crept a permanent feeling that everything was very wrong- a constant disquiet, a perpetual sinking feeling in the stomach. Sometimes he felt guilty. Maybe he should have spoken out. But why hadn’t Chander’s wife spoken up for herself? Maybe she wanted to keep it quiet. In that case, maybe he was right to keep quiet too.” (Bajwa:200).

He felt a void and thought of blurting out the truth with a sincerest cause and for a sincerest reason to the high flown educated Mrs Sachdeva. Ramchand narrated the whole ugly sordid story of Kamala to Mrs Sachdeva but education and philanthropic tendency have not sensitized her mind and agonized her heart for an underdog. Mrs Sachdeva rather became agitated and blurted: “How dare you, a mere shop assistant, bring me here to this corner and tell me filthy stories about the kind of women you seem to know.” (Bajwa:213) Bajwa unmasked the saucy fabricated feminist minds who do not stand together to save their gynocentric world without ignoring rational, social, political and economic differences, where Kamala is a shadow, a ghost in society who in defining her identity as a subaltern raises the platform of elitism where women like Bhandaris, Sachdevas, Kapoors, Guptas glamorize their class superiority.

However, the live burning of Kamla, the sly smile of bizarre Hari, the claustrophobic shop den filled his mind with irrational fear at the growing disbelief and replaced his detachment with an unfamiliar anger. The thought of Lakhan Singh’s son being killed cringed his heart and rage welled up at the constant injustice. He thought of bringing in a revolutionary change “I will do something. These things can’t just go on happening. Everything will change one day.” (Bajwa:222) and finally seeks refuge in his room. Ramchand’s existential instability is due to his loss of self-identity, his freedom to the purpose of being ‘for-itself’ (in relation with the bourgeoisie) Ramchand remembrance of Kamala, the deadening laughter of Hari made him immobile, he cried, but couldn’t scream, he felt anger brewing within him “What a constant injustice! What a warped way of living! How wrong it all was! He felt reckless, strong enough to do anything, fight anyone for justice, for truth.” (Bajwa:222) His existence is at stake, fear treaded close at his feet, darkness helplessness smothered him and nightmares haunted him, shadows chased him, silence deafened him and saris strangulated him to death. It is now that he vindictively

shouted at Mahajan and defied him to be God, threatened Hari for smirking with blood shot eyes yelled at the shop to break, strike and destroy. “And then Ramchand spat” (Bajwa:230) at the corrupted system and the crisis created in the lives of the subalterns and left. Ramchand by setting his foot down against the societal malpractices exercises positive freedom i.e. ‘wish to be a subject not an object (Berlin:131) as to be conscious of own thinking, willing ‘ bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by reference to my own ideas and purposes.’ (Berlin:131) He spent twelve days without any rage, reservations, contentment, doubt, objective and grief, feeling completely void. The imagery of spider who purposely and industriously spins its web to catch the prey and the lizard who pounces with the steadfastness at the sight of a slight insect portrays the evil killer instinct of the capitalist who depends on the menials for the survival strategy.

The existential crisis, the loss, the humiliation that the subalterns bear is for the silence that is created by the power relations from which resistance emerges stifling and muting their voices and their conscience. So the marginalized cannot speak as the discursive powers are wielded by the elite centre that construct the periphery and misrepresent the subaltern other. In reclaiming their identity Ramchand and Kamala have transgressed the intellectual fortress but did not dismantle subalternity. They utilized the freedom of speech and expression to create a ‘third space of enunciation’ (Bhabha) that tries to retrieve the silenced voices.

After a period of hibernation and inaction, his rage dissolves into a kind of vacant state where there is “no rage, no worries, no happiness, no ambition, no doubt, no grief. He felt completely black” (Bajwa: 232) and found his room in a total disarray. He had forgotten the dates; he couldn’t remember what sequel of incidences has brought staleness in his life and locked its momentum. Ramchand recollected July 14 and his frenzied delirium at the sari shop and his muddled disoriented behavior before the mahajan. His futile thoughts are dumped away at the thought of his survival, and in desperation he run to the shop, and fell at Mahajan’s feet to get back to his routine duties. “Bauji, please forgive me. I don’t know how could I have.....” (Bajwa:239) Ramchand’s return to the trapped web of capitalism is a new awareness of the plight of the marginalized, the resultant frustration and the power equation that existed in the society. true to Gokul’s comment “While living in the same water, a small fish cannot afford to make enemies with the crocodile.” (Bajwa:199)

Commenting on the end of the novel, Rupa Bajwa in an interview says,

For me, it was the natural turn of events. Ramchand’s character is such that he could not break out of his boundaries. The idea was not to have Ramchand and Kamla fighting the system and coming out as winners in the end. The idea was just to try and

understand them, and to understand everything else around us. In our complex society, it is really not easy to change the world, or even part of it, or even our own life sometimes (The Tribune, 2004).

Though Moorthy in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* says: "I am a free man Police Sahib. I can speak." (Rao:64) but Bajwa's delineating real life characters presents graphically the proverbial pathos and the existential crisis of a subaltern life. Both Ramchand and Kamala face crisis, they rebel against the set power structure reclaiming identity for honourable living to prove their sufferance futile by mute surrender and death.

The Sari Shop is not the upturning of hegemony and restoring the subaltern's subject position but as Rupa Bajwa in an interview stated: "When I was writing *The Sari Shop* I was trying to learn and explain – it was a desperate attempt to make sense of the complete chaos around me, to recognize the complete structure of life as I saw it. I experienced anger at the society I live in as well as the undying hope that keeps us all going."

(<http://books.wwnorton.com/books/ReadingGuidesDetail>) Ramchand acknowledges the futility of his task and the certainty of his fate, and reaches a state of contented acceptance As Albert Camus says in the conclusion of *The Myth of Sisyphus* "The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart."

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