

Vol. 8, No. 1: CLRI February 2021 | p 43-51

Marxist Feminism and its Importance in Today's World of Intersectional Approaches

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Abstract

This paper deals with the relevance of Marxist Feminism in the 21st century. It begins by talking about Marxism and Feminism as independent schools of thought and then goes on to discuss how their amalgamation is the need of the hour since disparities based on class structures is something even Intersectional Feminism doesn't delve into. This paper tries to critique both through the lens of the other and aims to prove how at the point of their intersection we can expect a change. It also discusses the struggles of the working class and their revolution within the feminist framework.

Keywords

Marxist feminism, class oppression, intersectionality, Marxist philosophy, Feminist school.

Introduction

Both Marxism and Feminism have evolved and emerged to be very different from what they were supposed to mean and address, in the present times. They exist independently as theories that have been read, understood, and debated at various platforms and for various interests. Throughout the movements and revolutions, these theories have been put into practice and different strands of diverging thoughts and opinions have sprung up through them. Intellectuals and academicians have been united and divided on certain fronts concerning the overarching themes these theories cater to. Apart from just bringing in a new wave of thinking in their respective periods of Wollstonecraft or Marx or Engels, these theories independently have also criticised the other on various grounds and occasions.

Marxism's most prevalent criticism¹ in the world of feminist or any other theory is and continues to be, as Heidi Hartmann said, sex-blind. The base that Marx talks about, which is the foundation of social relations, does not take into account the gender of the persons involved in the relationship. A lot of feminist critics have pointed out to this lack and stated how sex has always been a marker of discrimination even prior to the emergence of capitalist societies. Women have been

1 Hartmann, Heidi (1979) The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union.

discriminated against on biological, economic, social, and cultural grounds since the beginning of time and Marxism fails to recognise this difference. It fails to distinguish between a male bourgeois capitalist who exploits his workers and a female bourgeois capitalist who also exploits her workers but is herself exploited by the male head of the household. Feminism, on the other hand, has received backlashes on a lot more grounds than Marxism under the umbrella of being non-accommodating in one or the other way. One of the earliest forms of Black Lesbian Feminism had to emerge because of multiple reasons. The empowerment of women without question meant the empowerment of the Heterosexual White Woman clearly because blacks weren't considered humans at all. But what European Feminism, or more popularly known today as White Feminism, did not ever address is also the difference between women working in the factories and those locked away in manorial estates and palaces. Indeed, they both were and are in need of being empowered but the kind and degree of their empowerment differs manifold. Talking in the voice of a woman belonging to a Third World country, I would also point out as to how Neo-Liberal Feminism, which claims to cater to everyone who identifies as a woman, regardless of race, place of origin, or ethnicity, is also flawed in the sense that it fails to recognise the layered levels of intersectional differences a woman belonging to California and a woman belonging to Nigeria have. Similarly, Dalit Feminism points out such hypocrisy in Savarna Feminism²

² Based on caste hierarchy where upper caste women do not consider the plight of lower caste women thus, rendering the movement exclusive

which doesn't give space for the representation of the woes and voices of Bahujan women who cannot identify with the upper caste women because their oppressions have been way different. Intersectional Feminism, which is seen to be the way to go about in the present times, also somehow lacks where class comes into picture. Even though intersectional feminists understand these demarcations based on the economical front, they take a step back when the issues of these working classes have to be represented for the fear of appropriating movements. This is the time, according to me, when Marxism and Feminism need to collide.

Marxism and Feminism have always had respective agendas and have catered to/targeted somewhat different groups of people in different timeframes and contexts. Where on the one hand, Marxism talks about the liberation of the proletariat from the clutches of the exploitation meted out by the bourgeois disregarding gender inequalities absolutely, Feminism speaks of the collective struggle that women need to participate in and win in order to break the patriarchal structures present in institutions that they are a part of in their everyday lives. There is a sort of collectivisation that is the main aim of both these theories and movements for the outbreak of a Communist or a Feminist Revolution but what they lack is the understanding that people cannot just collectivise on the basis of one identity. Their identity as working class or as a woman would come into picture when we are talking of such revolutions because these class and gendered angles would define their demands from the revolution. And this is not an easy task because we are never in control of the identity we want to project in the public

domain. This is one reason why historically, Marxism and Feminism have struggled to reconcile. They have had their own share of areas of overlap and antagonisms. One of the major setbacks for women in this intermingling of the Left with the Feminist Movement has been allocating the roles of men and women and their contributions to the cause. In the words of Lydia Sargent³ as she writes in her essay titled *New Left Women and Men: The Honeymoon is Over*, "Women working in the new left and civil rights organisations were faced more and more with two main problems: (1) the problem of day-to-day work (who cleans the office/who messes it up, who writes the leaflets/who types them, who talks in meetings/who takes notes, who gains status through sexual relations/who gives status through sexual relations) and; (2) the problem of theory (who leads the revolution, who makes it, who is liberated by it, and who keeps the home fires burning during it). It didn't take long for new left women to discover the answers to the problems of theory and day-to-day work. Marxism defined the answer to the first question; sexist males the answer to the second."

The question then remains of the development of a coherent structure with which we analyse the oppression of women in capitalist societies. To this, Pat and Hugh Armstrong⁴ in their essay *Beyond Sexless Class and Classless Sex: Towards Feminist*

³ Sargent, Lydia (1981) "New Left Women and Men: The Honeymoon is Over", in Lydia Sargent (ed.) *Women and Revolution: The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (London: Pluto Press)

⁴ Armstrong, Pat and Armstrong, Hugh (1983) "Beyond Sexless Class and Classless Sex: Towards Feminist Marxism." *Studies in Feminist Economy*

Marxism “suggest ways to go forward in developing a political economy that comprehends the fundamental importance of sex divisions at all levels of analysis.” They further say that the subordination of women was destined in the capitalist mode of production because of the division of labour at home and at workplace. Indirectly, this also suggests that had this division not existed, capitalism would have created these conditions of women’s oppression and the reason provided is the fact that capitalism is premised on free wage labour. Therefore, it is suggested that this sexual division in labour “is crucial to capitalism and therefore to its theorisation.”⁵ Here is where Michele Barrett disagrees with the Armstrongs even though they nearly reach to the same conclusion. She says that subordination of women has existed before the capitalist mode of production and this mode of production adapted and used this existing division to its benefits. The question of who would look after the house and who would go out and woe, make policy decisions, be the financial bread-winner of the household was decided in the interests of men. Patricia Connelly states in her essay *On Marxism and Feminism*, “Barrett concluded that women’s oppression in capitalist society is characterised by a particular form of family household that has both an ideological and material basis and that has a profound effect on the relationship between women’s wage and domestic labour. It is important to point out that Armstrong and Armstrong agree with this conclusion

⁵ Barrett, Michele (1980) *Women’s Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis*. London: Verso.

since they argue that the sexual division of labour must be understood at all levels of analysis."

The French Marxist Feminist Luce Irigaray's famous argument in her essay *Women on the Market*⁶ is that women are not born as commodities but are made into one in this capitalist system. It is the same argument that goes along with institutions of marriage where women are supposed to be passed on like cattle from one male owner's household to the other. They have no agency of their own, no voice, and no individuality. She explores how women's role in this capitalist market is just to proliferate it and how their labour is exploited by male capitalists. Some contemporary feminists would believe that her approaches need to be grounded in the century we are living in because some geographical lands claim to have moved to a postfeminism phase where women are exploiting other women in this mechanism of capitalist functioning, It is here that I base my argument of why consideration of class becomes highly important even after facing multiple criticisms. In the world of today, where feminism has become about harping names of the first woman on the moon or the first woman to set foot on the Mount Everest, do we buy into this idea of individualistic achievement through merit? Do we consider the first woman CEO of a multinational corporation as the harbinger of women's empowerment when through her "empowerment" hundreds and hundreds of women are being exploited and oppressed in factories and industries every hour of the day?

⁶ Irigaray, Luce (1977) "Women on the Market", *This Sex Which is Not Once*. Editions de Minuit.

Of course, when I talk of theory and that of practicality, there is a vast difference and it brings me to Hartmann again when he says in his essay, *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union*, that the amalgamation of the two is like a marriage between a husband and wife. What I understand from this is that when we talk of battling capitalism, the question of women and their status in society always gets compromised because of the marxist angle of class. It is always women who suffer because of this overlap since marxism anyway doesn't talk of gender. And to some extent, I do agree with Hartmann. Women have always had to take a back step because there has essentially been something of more value or something that deserves more attention and so, their issues never come to the forefront. But here, I am talking about the relationship of women with themselves in a capitalist society and how they can be the agents of their own change. I am not talking of a set up where men have to be separated from women for their liberation from this corrupt and exploitative system but the initial task for us, as feminists, is to ensure a common ground where for the initial beginning, all women can collectivise on some ground that affects them all. And in order to make this possible it is imperative for us to think about how money plays a role and how commodification in ways more than one can result in delineation of women from themselves, thus rendering the feminist movement futile.

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